

UFYB 91: Numbing + Compulsive Behavior Vol. 1



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 rock star, and master coach, Kara Loewenthal.

In this episode, I am teaching about behaviors that we use to numb out and that can feel compulsive to us. I am not talking about compulsive behaviors in a clinical sense, and if you have clinically compulsive behavioral problems that pose a danger to you or others, you should consult professional mental health treatment.

Hello my chickens, how are you all? I am feeling great. I just got back from a mastermind meeting in Dallas and I'd never spent more than a day or two in Texas in my life until maybe two years ago. And then my teacher moved from Sacramento to Dallas and so now I spend a few days every quarter in basically an upscale strip mall. Like a planned community I guess is what you would call it in Plano, and that's not a phrase I thought I would ever say in my life.

And I'm - so much happened at this mastermind meeting. I'm really excited to share more of it with you as I start creating these visions. I have so many great ideas for the podcast, I have an amazing set of events that we're going to do inside The Clutch, just so much good stuff. But I was laughing with some of my other mastermind members because as I just kind of said, I never thought that I would be willingly going to like a fancy strip mall in Plano to hang out so often.

And it sort of sparked this conversation about all of the things that many of us never thought we would like or do or believe before we discovered coaching work. And we were sort of talking about how in order to evolve into the next version of ourselves, we had to give up some of the beliefs that we used to use to define ourselves and differentiate ourselves from others.

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I found that I couldn't keep my opinions and judgments about certain kinds of people or places or activities and still be an effective coach for myself or others. I had to be willing to see the subjectivity of my own beliefs and I had to be willing to change some of them in order to grow. And that process can be painful and uncomfortable. It can be very disorienting. Your brain does not like it because your brain wants to stay the way it is.

And before coaching, I had a lot of negative opinions about various people and places and things, and it would be impossible to list them all but you know, they included things like making money or golf or Texas or the suburbs or cruises or shrimp cocktail. Just any of the hundreds of little opinions you have and those were just a few of mine.

And I feel like I should just pause and say obviously, the point here is I don't believe there's anything wrong with any of those things. So nobody needs to write me an email about how much they love eating shrimp cocktail while they're on a cruise playing golf that left from Texas.

The whole point is there's nothing wrong with any of those things, but that all of us have thoughts about the things that we do like or don't like, and that when we're not managing our minds, we're very intense about those things, and we even use them kind of as an identity. We take whatever our unconscious thoughts or preferences are and we make them mean something about the kind of people we are and the kind of people that others are.

And at the time, when I still believed all those things strongly, those thoughts felt very important and true, and they felt powerful and they felt meaningful. They felt like they meant something about the kind of person that I was and the kind of person that other people were.

We talk a lot about how some of our thoughts don't serve us around here, by which I mean I talk about it on the podcast. We talk about it a lot in The

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Clutch obviously, wherever I'm coaching, and that's useful in a way. I think it is useful to look at your thoughts and see which ones don't serve you, but it's also useful to see that any belief system we have that we're really invested in or any action, like any thought and behavior cycle we have that we are really invested in, we developed because it served us in some way, or it's still serving us, even if we can also see how it's not.

That's why we developed it. So for instance, what I can see now about my thoughts about golf and cruises and the suburbs and whatever is that those thoughts felt important to define me because I didn't love and accept myself. So in order to feel justified in being me, I had to adopt these strenuous self-righteous opinions about rejecting everything that wasn't one of my preferences or a characteristic I had or a way I spent my time.

It really didn't matter what the subject was. I just needed to define what was acceptable, trying to convince myself I was acceptable by rejecting what was different from me. But of course I only wanted to do that because I didn't believe I was acceptable the way I was. So I had to reject other people in order to try to pretend that I was justified in my own opinions.

I see in my clients all the time that we're only preoccupied with being better than other people when we think other people are better than us. When we truly accept and love ourselves, we suddenly stop ranking others or even thinking that some people are better than others. So why am I telling you all this when the title of this episode is numbing and compulsive behaviors?

It's because I think it's super important when you start to work on compulsive or numbing behaviors that you practice seeing the ways in which those behaviors have actually served and helped you. There's so much judgment and shame around these kinds of behaviors and we create that judgment and shame in our own minds, with our own thoughts, and I think they're particularly intense because these are often behaviors that we

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sort of often know that we're doing them compulsively or that we are kind of doing them against our own will or that we wish didn't do them as much.

And we feel powerless, we don't feel able to stop doing them, and that creates so much shame. And like any other area of thought work, we have to resolve the shame and self-judgment before we can do anything about the underlying pattern or behavior. So let me define what kind of behaviors I'm talking about here. Think that would probably be useful. Note to self.

So when I talk about numbing behaviors or compulsive behaviors, I'm talking about any activity that you do to zone out or get away from your own thoughts and feelings. And usually these behaviors feel compulsive in the sense that you often want to stop doing them and feel like you can't. Now, I am not talking about compulsion as a clinical diagnosis. That's not something that I would be qualified to diagnose and especially not on a podcast.

So we're not talking about it in a clinical sense. I just am using that word to mean the way it feels when you have a habit or behavior you want to stop and yet you find that you're doing it almost to spite yourself, or quite consciously to spite yourself. That's what feels compulsive about it, that you feel like you can't control it. You have a thought that you can't control it.

So common activities we use to numb out that might feel compulsive include eating, drinking, shopping, watching porn, watching TV, playing video games or games on our phones, biting our nails, picking our skin, pulling our hair, smoking, taking drugs, binging, binging and purging, cutting, scrolling social media, and a million other things that we might do.

It's also important to note that numbing out or compulsive behavior can include activities that society tells us are virtuous or for which you actually receive social approval. There are plenty of people in the world who are

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compulsively exercising, who are exercising to escape their feelings or try to manage them and who freak out if they can't exercise.

Same, you can be doing that by obsessing about fat grams or calories or toxins. Any kind of orthorexic focus. Orthorexic really literally means becoming obsessed with health to the point that it's detrimental to you. That can be a way of numbing out and that can be compulsive. Decluttering your house could be numbing out and compulsive. It really isn't about the activity.

It's anything you're doing to distract yourself from your own emotional experience. You're using that as a numbing activity. Obviously, many of those activities that I just mentioned can be done in a way that is not about numbing yourself out or escaping your own experience. Maybe not all of them, but certainly some of them.

Quite a few of those activities you might be able to enjoy if you're being mindful and present and it's not numbing. Certainly eating or drinking or shopping or watching TV, watching porn or playing a game, even scrolling social media, that kind of thing - some of those things we have to do to stay alive, and all of them we could do mindfully and enjoy them.

So the distinction is not about the literal behavior. I think it's about these three questions. Number one, why are you doing it? Number two, how do you feel while you're doing it and after doing it, and before really? How do you feel in the moment before you do it? How do you feel while you do it? And how do you feel after you do it? Number three, do you feel anxious or agitated to think about not being able to do it?

Now, I don't mean thinking about voluntarily giving it up because probably you have a lot of fantasies about that, but I mean if you really wanted to do it and someone else made it physically impossible for you, would you feel anxious or agitated?

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We develop numbing behaviors because we don't know how to tolerate our uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. No one teaches us that feelings are harmless if we just allow and process them. And instead, we're taught explicitly and implicitly that feelings are dangerous and uncontrollable and should be repressed or not expressed.

So I don't think it's a surprise that we turn to whatever substances or activities we can find to get a break from the intensity of feelings that we don't know how to manage. That's totally normal. So your answer to those questions would vary, but usually number one, why are you doing it, you're doing it because you're trying to avoid some kind of emotional discomfort or seek a concentrated pleasure because you're not comfortable just being present in your own skin without distraction or without overloading your brain with dopamine.

And how you feel before and during and after, again, it will vary quite a bit, but if you are numbing, often beforehand you'll feel agitated like you need to numb out and during, you may feel some relief but also some conflicted feelings about it, and afterwards, you usually don't feel great. And then does it make you feel anxious or agitated to not be able to do it if you're really habituated to this behavior? Usually the answer to that is yes because you think you need it to feel okay.

So again, it's totally normal. Not in the sense that it has to be this way, but in the sense that most of us have some behaviors we use this way and that it makes sense if you don't teach children when they're young how to process their emotions and how to have any feeling and how to manage their minds. Almost all of us were not taught that growing up. Of course we will find ways to try to cope with things that feel frightening or overwhelming for us, which is our own emotions.

The problem is that there are quite a few consequences to numbing, especially if you're doing it a lot. There are the direct consequences of the

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behavior and that can totally vary, but it can be credit card debt, missed appointments, physical damage to your body, health impacts, financial impacts. Impacts on your relationships, your time. I could spend three hours detailing different ones. It all depends on what the behavior is.

But there are sort of the direct consequences of it, then there's the indirect consequence of the opportunity cost, which means all that time and emotional energy that you are spending on thinking about numbing out and numbing out and then shaming and judging yourself for having numbed out and then wanting to numb out again. That's one of the reasons that the shame and judgment is so important to deal with because when you create shame and judgment about a numbing behavior, you know what you want to do. You want to numb out.

If you create shame and judgment for yourself, then you want comfort or to numb out to get away from that shame and judgment. So judging and shaming yourself for numbing behavior or compulsive behavior just creates more of that behavior. All that emotional energy and time from all that spin you could be spending on other things in your life.

And there's emotional consequences. So the problem is - one of the problems is when you numb out the negative emotions in your life, you also numb out the positive. So remember what I teach about contrast. We can't have the good without the bad. If you aren't willing to feel and process negative emotion, you also won't really feel and process positive emotion as much either.

And then finally, there are what - I mean, I think you could call these the spiritual consequences. I don't know that I would use the word spiritual, but it's just kind of biggest picture, next level consequences, which is what it costs you to not be present in your own life. What it does to you when you are unwilling to be with yourself without a buffer between you and your own experience.

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What it means to constantly reject yourself and turn away from the present moment, which is all we have. It's just like living a life in which you are not willing to be present with yourself. So common and we all do it, and yet it has such high cost for our happiness and our health and our ability to truly live with presence and intention.

It's a lot of negative consequences, but I also think at the same time, it's important to stress that I don't teach that numbing is always bad. I mean, I don't really teach it's ever bad because I don't think assigning moral value or judgment to any behavior is a good idea. It only makes it harder to change. Shaming ourselves is not motivating.

So I don't think numbing is good or bad, but I do think it's something to be aware of and I think it has some benefits to us when we don't know how to manage our minds or have our feelings, but it also has a lot of consequences. It has a benefit and it has a lot of cost. And since we can learn how to have our feelings, process our emotions and manage our minds, that's a ratio that we can learn to adjust.

But I'm not being absolutist about this. I don't teach that the goal of life is to never ever use a numbing behavior. I don't generally take Ibuprofen because it's damaging to your stomach lining and there's a lot of studies about what's not great about it for you. But occasionally, if something is very painful and I need to be able to focus on something else and there's something very pressing going on, I will take some.

I know that it has some damaging consequences, but it's worth it to me in that moment. Similarly, you may not want to be using food or alcohol or social media or whatever else for comfort and to escape yourself every day of your life, but that doesn't mean you have to never use it that way. And that's where the compulsive element of the way that I teach this really comes in.

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Choosing to enjoy something intentionally, whether it's food or alcohol or shopping or porn or whatever, is very different from using it unconsciously. I talked about that above. But even choosing occasionally to go unconscious but choosing that consciously is very different than doing it on autopilot all the time because you have made that choice and you're not lying to yourself about what you're doing and you're not lying to yourself that it's out of your control.

Especially as you are learning how to process emotions and sit with difficult feelings and change your thoughts, you are going to be experiencing a lot more negative emotion than you are used to. And you may occasionally choose to numb out a little bit, and that's okay. There's no right amount or ratio or proportion. It's just a human thing that humans do and it's something that can decide to try to do less if we want.

It's actually more than human. I was reading an article recently about how some wild horses will eat fermented grass just to get a little high. Or my cat likes catnip. It's not even just humans. There's a big difference though between making it conscious and doing it automatically and unconsciously and against your own will and telling yourself that you can't control it.

If you choose to numb out because you don't want to have a feeling you're having or you're bored and you don't want to take responsibility for your own education or entertainment in life, or you don't want to be present in your own life or spend time with yourself, you're allowed to make that choice. That's always up to you. But it still changes everything to know that it's a choice and to know why you're making it.

When you make a choice on purpose, you are by definition not being compulsive. Active choice and control are the opposite of compulsion. Choice and comprehension are the two keys to dealing with numbing. I am not teaching you how to change these behaviors in this episode and that's on purpose because we have so much shame around them that we all

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immediately want to jump to changing them because we think that will solve the shame, which of course it won't. The shame is created by your thoughts.

It's absolutely possible to change them. I've changed several numbing behaviors that used to be very frequent parts of my life, and I used thought work to do it and I'm going to teach you how to change them next week. But not yet and don't turn off the podcast because there is something I want you to do this week. Those of you who are like, I just have to change this, I don't have any time to accept myself, awareness and comprehension and compassion are so crucial for changing numbing behaviors.

So I just want you to practice paying attention to yourself. Notice when you are engaging in a behavior that you wish you could stop. Notice when it feels like you're acting against your own will. Notice what kinds of behaviors in your life you always vow to change or stop and then you can't. When you notice you're wanting to engage in a compulsive behavior, or sometimes you won't notice until it's over, you've already done it, you realize you just did it, go back to these three questions.

Number one, why am I doing this? What feeling am I trying to escape and that thought is causing that feeling? Number two, how do I feel before, during, and after I do it? Number three, is it stressful to think about not having the option to do this? And why is that?

Don't try to change anything yet. Just pay attention to yourself and notice. I really suggest writing down what you notice because that is how you will really get access to the thoughts. When it comes to a numbing habit that feels compulsive, there's a habit loop formed so that you do it pretty unconsciously usually. We have to bring it into conscious awareness to learn more about it.

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And writing down what's going on is the best way to do that. Don't judge yourself. Don't shame yourself. Just get curious. This habit is serving you somehow, so find out how. Figure out what it's doing for you. Either way, I want you to spend this week bringing attention and awareness to those behaviors. Curiosity and compassion. And next week I'll teach you how to start changing them if and when you want.

If you're in The Clutch, you'll have a workbook to help you keep track of this, to help you keep track of the behavior you're trying to change and these three questions and learning what that behavior is doing for you and when you're doing it and what it feels like. And if you are not in The Clutch but you struggle with compulsive behaviors or numbing, now is really a great time to join so that I can walk you through this process step by step.

And because this week and next week's episodes go together, if you join any time between when this episode comes out and August 7th - it's 2019 if you're listening to this in the future - join by August 7th 2019, you'll get both workbooks for both episodes. So you can join now, any time to August 7th and you'll get both workbooks for both episodes. It's just www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch.

And if you don't or can't join us and you just want to keep track of it yourself, just do it on any sheet of paper. But like I said, make sure you write it down. Don't try to do it in your head because we have to bring awareness to it. Awareness truly is the secret sauce to life, my friends. It makes everything possible. Alright, I love you all and I will talk to you next week.

If you're loving what you're learning in the podcast, you have got to come check out The Clutch. The Clutch is the podcast community for all things *Unf*ck Your Brain*. It's where you can get individual help applying the concepts to your own life.

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It's where you can learn new coaching tools not shared on the podcast that will blow your mind even more, and it's where you can hang out and connect over all things thought work with other podcast chickens just like you and me. It's my favorite place on earth and it will change your life, I guarantee it. Come join us at www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. It's [unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). I can't wait to see you there.