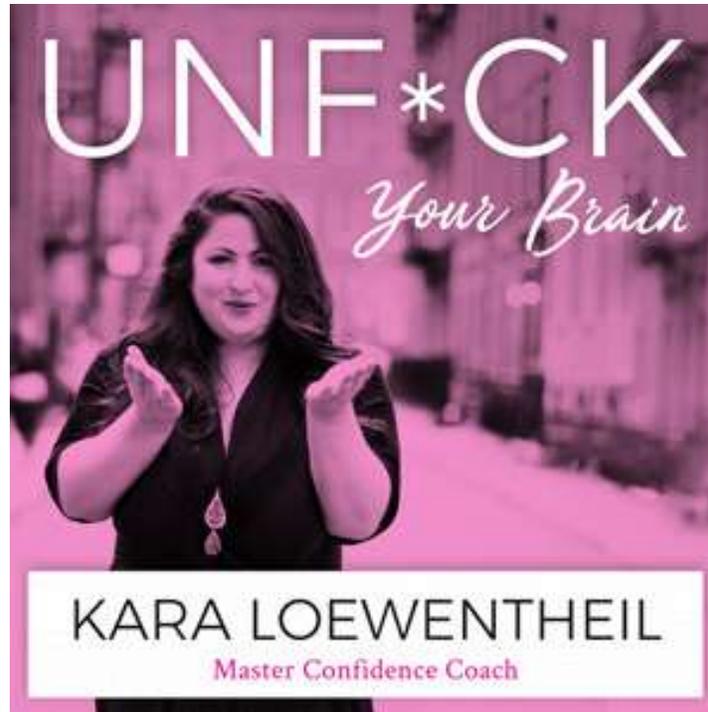


## UFYB 93: Problem-Addiction



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## UFYB 93: Problem-Addiction

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 Loewentheil.

Hello my chickens. How are you guys all holding up? We have been tackling some big stuff this month so it's okay if you feel a little mind-blown, if you feel a little shook. It's alright.

If you haven't listened to the past few episodes, especially the perfectionist fantasy and problem thinking episode, I think they're useful background for this episode. I mean, I think they're just useful in general, if I do say so myself, but I think they're useful background for this episode, so you might want to go listen to that first.

So the last few weeks we've been talking about numbing and "compulsive behaviors," again, not compulsive in a clinical sense where you need professional mental healthcare to deal with it but just those habits that you wish you could stop but feel kind of out of your control, where you tell yourself you only want to drink on the weekends but then you find yourself drinking on a Wednesday.

And we're not talking about drinking a fifth of vodka in the morning, but just you decide I don't want to have that nightly glass of wine, I only want to drink on the weekends but then it's Wednesday, you have a glass of wine. Or you tell yourself that you're not going to check social media while you're working, and then all of a sudden you're on social media.

So just those habits that you wish you could stop but they feel very kind of difficult to control in the moment. You almost feel like you're doing them against your own will or almost beyond your own conscious control, like you don't remember making the conscious decision to do them. They're

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really automatic habits. They just happen. So that's what the last two episodes are about.

And in the last couple episodes, I talked about how you can work on changing those behavioral patterns. And today I want to talk about what is sometimes going on when you try to solve those or you solve them for a while and then all of a sudden you stop. You "fall off the wagon" or you "backslide." I'm putting all that in quotes because I'm really strict in The Clutch with my students that there's no such thing as backsliding or falling off the wagon because it's such perfectionist language. We're trying to be perfect and now we're not.

But that being said, certainly there are times where we make a lot of progress on solving a problem or a habit or a non-habit problem in our life, just solving a problem or changing something about our life, and then we undo all of it. We stop doing the thing or we go back to the job or the relationship or whatever it is we do.

And today I want to talk to you about why that happens, and I call that problem-addiction. Again, I'm not talking about clinical addiction because there's no such thing as being clinically addicted to a problem. If you have some kind of clinical level addiction, you should consult a mental health professional or a doctor. That's not what this episode is about.

I'm not talking about being addicted to a substance or even a behavior. What I'm talking about is the way that we can get "addicted" to our own problems. So I mean kind of being addicted to having a problem of any kind. Being habituated and used to and dependent on having a certain thing in your life be a problem, whether that's your weight, or your body image, or your dating life, or your marriage, or your work stress, or your relationship with your mom, whatever it is.

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Being kind of addicted to that being a problem in your life. Now, obviously it's a metaphor because having a problem is not an addiction. It's a thought. Nothing is a problem unless we decide to believe it is one. But one of the fascinating things that I see in my clients and in myself is that if we are used to something in our lives being a problem, we will continue to make it a problem.

Sorry, I'm a little scratchy today because I actually - I've been getting an uptick in complaints about my voice on the podcast, which I don't know, is hilarious. If you hate my voice, you can go read the transcript. But I just want y'all to know I come by this honestly. My mother and I have very deep voices. This is not artificial vocal fry. This is just how I was born. And also, I record first thing in the morning when I haven't really talked.

So I sound a little froggy today but hopefully you can forgive me. So what was I saying? So one of the things that I see so often is that if we're used to something in our lives being a problem, we will continue to make it a problem. And that makes sense because our thoughts produce our results. So if we think something is a problem, we make it a problem. We find and we produce with our actions more and more evidence to prove ourselves right that the thing is a problem.

So let's say that we believe that we can't find a partner. That's our problem. And when we believe we have that problem, number one, cognitive bias makes us distort everything. So clients will come and post in The Clutch and we'll coach through how they have the story that their romantic life never works out, they're always single, they've never had a partner. You look at their romantic life, they've actually had plenty of boyfriends or girlfriends or partners of whatever gender.

But their brain is like, discounting them all. This one didn't count for that reason, this one wasn't normal for that reason because they are so attached to the belief that they have a problem with their love life, that that's

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their big problem. So cognitive bias happens, but also we create more evidence for ourselves.

So if you believe that, then you don't go into first dates with the same open attitude or you're always looking for problems in the people that like you. You produce more evidence for yourself. So when we believe that we have a problem, we make it a problem. And what's so wild is that we think we want to solve the problem. We think we want to solve it more than anything. It's the thing we think about all the time and complain to our friends about and journal about and want to get coaching on. We're so convinced that we want to solve the problem.

We think that if we just lose weight or got that promotion or got married or got divorced or could have a kid or could manage our existing kid or didn't have our step-kid or if we moved home or if we moved away or whatever else it is, if we could just fix that problem, then we would be happy. And yet what I see is that we are addicted to having our problems.

I see this with my students. I teach them the tools they need to stop having their problem, how to manage their minds so they can think and feel and act differently and get a different result in their lives and change their lives. I've given them the solution. And they sort of want the solution. On the conscious level, they think they want the solution but they don't implement it or they don't implement it consistently.

And sometimes that's because they subconsciously don't want to solve the problem. They want to continue having the problem. Now, some of this is just habit and that's normal. When you're changing a behavioral pattern or you're changing a mental story you have about yourself, you have created a really strong neural network for the thoughts and if there's behavior involved, you usually have a pretty strong reward cycle for the action.

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That just means you've habituated your brain to think this thought, have this urge, take the action, get a hit of dopamine. Get a reward. It's a reward loop. So it's normal that you're used to and habituated to that, especially if there's a chemical hit involved. So even if you really truly do want to change a thought cycle or a behavioral cycle, part of you will always resist when you're starting out because you're just used to it.

So that's normal. That's to be expected. Learning how to manage that, like learning how to deal with urges or learning how to deal with the old thoughts coming up, that's part of the work we do to using thought work. That's normal, expected, and you can work through that and kind of get over that hump.

But that's not what I'm talking about here. I'm talking about something kind of bigger picture, and I'm talking about the subconscious desire to keep something as a problem in our lives. I don't think it's because of some original wound that we can't heal or something we have to hash out in analysis for a decade. I think it's because as long as we can keep the problem alive, we can keep alive the fantasy that when the problem is gone, you will finally be happy.

And that's why this podcast relates to the perfectionist fantasy podcast from a couple of weeks ago. Again, if you haven't listened to that one, I would go back and listen to it because what I talk about there is that the perfectionist fantasy is the fantasy that when we finally change one area of our lives or for some of us it's more than one, we'll be happy.

We just imagine this day when we finally have that kind of business, or when we finally have that partner, or when we finally have that workout routine, or we finally are that weight or whatever it is, and we imagine that we will be so happy then. And so we create these fantasies that we dream about but that are unrealistic and we never accomplish them because we're not actually interested or invested in the daily little bit of success, lots of

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failure kind of action grind that it takes to really change something in our lives. We just want to magically transport to the end result and be happy forever.

So problem-addiction is the other side of that coin. Many of us do not want to take responsibility for all of our thoughts and feelings. We don't want to believe that the only way to be truly happy is to manage our minds. So instead, we want to believe if we could just solve this one particular problem in our lives, then we would be happy.

And sometimes we even take action to solve a problem and we do change the external thing. We stop drinking, we start exercising, we get married, we get divorced, whatever it is. And then we aren't magically happy all the time, which we thought we would be. We thought, oh, now I'll feel good about myself. Now I'll feel confident. Now I'll love myself. I changed the thing.

Why am I still having the full range of human experience? Why am I still experiencing doubt and shame and anxiety and insecurity and sadness? I didn't want to have these emotions and I thought that if I just ran a marathon or got engaged or had a baby or made a million dollars I wouldn't have to have these feelings anymore. I would finally feel perfectly happy and good about myself.

So then we think oh, this didn't work. Let me try it again. We have so strongly created the neural circuit that just solving that problem that we had identified, whatever it was, would fix us, would change us into magically happy people that we recreate the problem so we try to solve it again. So we start drinking again. We stop exercising. We get divorced, then we get into another relationship where we can blame that partner.

It's all subconscious obviously. We are not consciously thinking this, but I see it again and again. If you believe you're supposed to be happy all the

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time, or you believe that something external - and here's the other thing you guys have to understand. Most of you would not say I believe I should be happy all the time. Negative emotion should never happen. You don't believe that intellectually.

But if you resist your negative emotion, you don't want to have it, you wish it would go away when it happens, you are believing that you should be happy all the time. You are believing or at least that you shouldn't have negative emotion you don't want to. So if you're unwilling to have that full range of human experience, you will always be looking for an escape hatch. You will always be looking for an exit route.

And sometimes when you've identified this thing in your life and people have sort of general categories I find. It's like, oh, it's my relationship with my family, that's always the thorn in my side. Oh, it's my love life, I never can get that quite right. Oh, it's my body, I can never get my exercise and eating together. Oh, it's money. I can never make enough money or feel like I have enough money.

You've told yourself over and over and over that that thing is the problem and if you just solved it, your life would work and you could be happy. Even if you take action to solve it and then you find that you aren't perfectly happy, you will recreate that problem. Or sometimes some of you will get creative and create a new problem.

So you'll quit smoking but then you will start drinking, or you will stop watching Netflix but then you'll play a game on your phone. You're just substituting in one kind of numbing for another or one kind of problem for another. If you believe that you are supposed to be happy all the time, if you are unwilling to have the full range of human experience, you will always be looking for an exit route. You will always be trying to get off this ride.

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And so you will create and recreate problems over and over so that you have something to try to fix. Something to try to solve. I really saw this in myself once I sort of did the thought work. Some of the things in my life I did actually change and some of them I just - well, I always had to do the thought work. Some of them involved actually changing habits, and then some of them involved - it was all more just thought work.

But I noticed that when I kind of resolved the last big one that I had been telling myself was the thing I needed to change to be happy, I noticed this kind of anti-climactic sense of so then, this is just life? So you can really see how it ties into perfectionist fantasy. It was like well, if I don't have this problem that I'm solving so that I can finally get the ecstasy at the end of it, then I guess I'm just every day existing in the world. Doing my job and sleeping and eating and talking to people and going to sleep and doing it again.

That's what my brain was sort of thinking like, oh, there isn't going to be this huge payoff. So again, totally in line with perfectionist fantasies. That big dopamine of imagining the perfect life. The perfection. And so that's why we will often, if we're not willing to go through that, like I am a coach so I can see okay, that's a thought error.

Like yes, my life is going to be less dramatic without this problem that I'm trying to fix to be happy, but I can choose to believe what I want about that and I can choose to believe that I'm actually going to be creating a life that is full of amazing meaning and experiences. I don't have to believe that oh, it's going to be flat. What am I going to do with myself? But I think a lot of us have that thought subconsciously. We're not aware of it because unless you're engaged in regular thought work and getting regular coaching, you're generally not aware of what's happening in your brain.

And so I think that's why we recreate these problems over and over, so that we will have something to fix and something to solve, so then we can be

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happy. The problem is what you're trying to fix or solve cannot be fixed or solved. There is no solution for having the human experience of both positive and negative emotion.

And we don't need a solution because it's not actually a problem. It's only a problem if we're unwilling to have the experience. It's only a problem if we are constantly trying to take off our seatbelt and jump off the ride. It's only a problem if we are thinking that there should be an exit route and we need one. We're on the wrong road, we're supposed to be on that other road over there where no one has any negative feelings and things never go wrong. It's only a problem if we believe that there's this other road and we need to figure out how to get on it.

Problem-addiction keeps us focused on thinking about our problems, and that means we intensify our negative emotion about our own lives so that we can imagine the sweet freedom of release we think we will get when we finally solve the problem. Perfectionist fantasies, again, are just dreams about the time when a certain thing in your life will be perfect and you will feel great. They skip over all the day-to-day of being a human, trying and failing, having lots of positive and negative emotion because that's our actual reality as humans.

So when you think about it, if you are invested in a perfectionist fantasy, you need to also have the problem that you want to solve. If you didn't have a problem, you wouldn't need a perfectionist fantasy. So if you are in that cycle of perfectionist fantasy that I talked about on that episode, you have to keep recreating your problem for yourself so that you have something to imagine escaping.

We subconsciously want the problem to be there, we're addicted to it, we're attached to it because without it, how can we imagine feeling perfect when things are different? If we don't have a problem that we can fantasize about

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solving in order to finally feel confident, feel happy, feel present, then we have to be present in our actual reality. We have to be present in the now.

And the now is sometimes amazing and transcendent, and sometimes it is boring, and sometimes it is excruciatingly painful because that is the human condition. That is the human experience. We are here to have the full range of human experience and emotion. We are here to love beyond measure and we are also here to lose beyond measure. We are here to feel joy, but we're also here to feel grief.

We are here to feel connected, but we are also here to feel alone. We are here to build incredible things, and we are also here to see them fall apart. You are not willing to be here to be with all of that, to be present for all of that, you will occupy yourself with a never-ending problem that you can never solve. It's a distraction. You will live in a world made of unnecessary suffering and fantasy relief that never comes. You can't have one without the other.

So if you have a problem that you just can't seem to solve, I want you to consider you may be addicted to your problem. If you're in The Clutch, I want you to do some writing about this. What is that problem? Why are you addicted to it? And I want you to share and discuss that in the Facebook group. I think it can be particularly tricky to spot if you have been doing thought work.

But if you're in The Clutch and you're using thought work tools and you're seeing progress in other areas and you're not sure why your brain is so attached to believing that your thoughts about one particular area are true, that's where you may be addicted to your problem. So I want you to think about and share why you don't actually want to solve your problem.

The truth is, or the truth may be that you do not want to actually solve your problem, whether it's a thought or an action, because you want to maintain

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your fantasy that if you just solve that problem, your life would be perfect. And you don't want to experience the truth, which is that there's no thought you can change, no action you can do differently, no problem you can solve that will save you from having the full human experience. The robot experience is not an option. I mean, at least not yet. Synchronicity has not arrived.

And I wouldn't take it even if it were. I don't want the robot option because there's actually no problem with having the full human experience. It's a beautiful thing and it's what we're here to do. The only problem is when we think it should be different or we think we're having too much of some part of it and not enough of another.

If you solve the problem by accepting reality, by willing to have the full human experience at any size or with any habits or working out or not, or married or single, or with any amount of money, or living in the city, or living in the country, or with a job or unemployed, whatever your life is, if you are willing to have the full human experience of your current life, you can solve any other problem you have.

And if this episode has made you recognize that there is an area of your life where you keep recreating a problem so you'll have something to solve, if you're in The Clutch, I definitely want you to post about that for discussion or take it to the coaches for coaching. Or take it to me on a call. If you're not in The Clutch, get your butt over and join us because this is truly one of the keys to unlocking the possibilities of your own life.

I want all of you, Clutch or not, to think about how much time and effort you expend trying to solve this problem. Sometimes over and over again because you recreate it once you solve it. The only solution is to learn how to be willing to experience all your emotions and to change your thoughts on purpose, and both of those are the foundation of what I teach and what you learn in The Clutch.

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I'm also going to be announcing soon an amazing live event. It's taking place in November and you need to be a member of The Clutch to attend it. So if you think you might want to come hang out in person and take this learning really deep, go to a kind of thought work immersion intensive program, you're going to want to come join The Clutch so you get first dibs on it. [www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). I'll see you there.

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.

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](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). It's [unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). I can't wait to see you there.