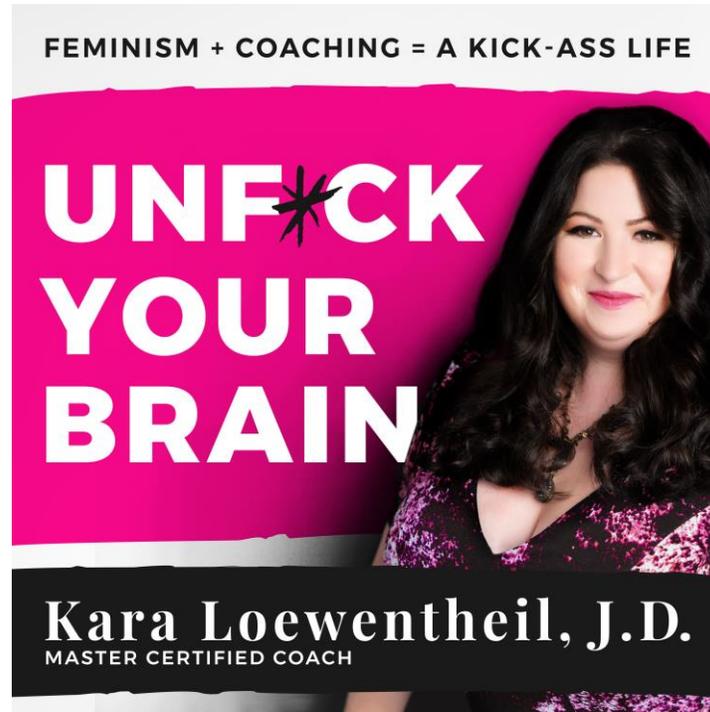


UFYB 15: COMPARE & DESPAIR



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *Unfuck 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 how here's your host, Harvard law school grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello my chickens. So today I want to start with a thought experiment, and I promise this is not going to be like your college philosophy classes. If you went to law school, that horrible - like, the tram is going down the tracks and you pull the switch. You guys know what I'm talking about if you're lawyers.

Okay, that's not what we're doing today. I'm a little punchy tonight. You guys, I hope that's okay. I hope we're all having fun. Alright, so here's the thought experiment. Let's say you're on the beach and you're feeling pretty rad, you're feeling your luck. You like your bathing suit, you're having a good hair day with all that sea breeze. If you had to rate your body satisfaction from one to a 10, it would be like a solid eight.

Then you look up from the selfie you're taking and you see two supermodels walking down the beach, trailed by photographers. And suddenly, you feel awful. Thoughts start darting through your brain, "They're gorgeous, I'll never look like that. Look how thin and glamorous they are. I'm so frumpy, my hair is frizzy, my thighs jiggle, I hate how I look."

Suddenly your body satisfaction has plummeted. That's totally illogical, right? Those supermodels existed before you saw them. They were just behind you and you didn't see them and you felt great about yourself. But as soon as they're in front of you and you compare yourself to them, then you feel terrible because you're using them to create a whole new set of self-critical thoughts.

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Now, we've all had an experience like this whether it's about our body, our career, our relationships, or anything else. And I call this compare and despair. I did not make up that saying, that phrase is out there. This is how I teach it and how I use it. So today I'm going to teach you why you're constantly comparing yourself to other people, why the compare and despair is so attractive, even though it feels terrible, why this is a problem, and how you can learn to stop.

So I use that term, compare and despair, because it's a quick and easy way of reminding yourself that anytime you are comparing yourself to other people, you are going to end up feeling bad, because most of us use these comparisons to criticize ourselves, and find ourselves wanting and lacking in the comparison. So before I really get into that, I'm going to say there is a little sort of side note. Sometimes we compare ourselves to other people to make ourselves feel better. So we'll pick someone who we think is worse than we are, and we'll compare ourselves to them and then we think we feel better. We get this like, fleeting sense of validation by sort of putting that other person down in our mind.

That's still part of the same problem. The only reason that we feel the need to do that is because we're usually comparing ourselves to other people and criticizing ourselves. So the only way we can think to feel better is to compare ourselves to someone else and praise ourselves compared to them. So all that is part of the same problem.

And psychological studies have actually backed up the idea that comparing yourself to others constantly can have a negative impact on your mental health. Perusing social media for instance, tends to prompt people to compare themselves to what they see others posting. And it's correlated with an increase in negative emotion after viewing.

Avoiding social media might remove the trigger, but if your brain is predisposed to think this way, doing that will not solve your problem. There

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are people all around you in daily life who you can compare yourself to, not to mention, celebrities, people on the news et cetera. So while I'm all for taking breaks from social media to get shit done in your real life, that's not the solution to your compare and despair habit.

The solution is really understanding why are you predisposed to do this, why have you been taught to do this, what's the impact on your brain when you do this, and how can you learn to change it. So there are a couple of reasons that you've developed this mental habit. Number one, humans are a tribal species. Social standing has always been a part of our culture, and understanding your relationship to the rest of the tribe and how you fit in with everyone else had an evolutionary advantage.

Being part of the group and matching other people was important to build connections and foster trust. That's the sort of very short version of the primitive side of it, which you know, in this particular instance, I think is less important. There are places where the evolutionary biology really tells us a lot about how our brains act. In compare and despair, I actually think it's much more about current, modern society, and that's really what I'm going to focus on.

But there is some you know, evidence or suggestions or theory that because humans are kind of tribal, and because you need it to work together with the tribe to survive, you might be sort of susceptible to being very aware of how you compare to other people. That's you know, as far as it goes.

Here are the things that I really think our current society in particular does that creates this problem. So number one, we live in a capitalist society, where we are encouraged to regard competition as healthy and normal. We were taught from an early age to think of ourselves as being in competition with everyone around us. We fetishize ideas like survival of the fittest, and we teach children that competition produces the best and the brightest.

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The problem with competition is that it means you're constantly comparing yourself to other people to see where you stand. And that's fine if you're in a 5k and it's easy to tell who won. But when it comes to all of the nebulous aspects of modern life, there's no clear winner or loser. But we absorb the ideology that there are winners and losers everywhere. And so, our brains are constantly trying to figure out where we are on that spectrum, and the only way we can think of to do that is to compare ourselves to other people all the time.

So your brain has been taught not only to compare yourself to others all the time, but to constantly be attributing importance and weight to those differences. You're not just looking for differences. You're looking to see if the differences are better or worse. You're constantly looking to see who are you in "competition" with, and who's winning.

And in addition, capitalism teaches us to commodify ourselves, that means to treat ourselves as commodities, as things to be bought and sold, to see ourselves as interchangeable. We're taught to see ourselves as living in a series of marketplaces. The job marketplace, the dating marketplace, et cetera. If you're in a marketplace and you're looking at products, what do you do? You compare them to see which one is better.

So thinking of ourselves as commodities in a marketplace really exacerbates this tendency to constantly compare ourselves to others as though we are just a collection of parts or attributes that matter based on how much they appeal to other people or how they can be evaluated in comparison to each other.

Now, listen, I'm an entrepreneur. I'm not saying that capitalism is evil or wrong and we shouldn't have it. But it's important to see the ways in which social and economic ideologies – they don't just exist in a vacuum. Capitalism is not just the way that our economy is structured; it's a whole ideology that infuses our social and personal lives as well.

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So thinking about the way that we are constantly encouraged to think that competition is good, that it's important to have competition, that it's important to know who is the best, who is succeeding, who is failing, who is showing themselves to be the victor in the market place – seeing the ways that those ways of thinking impact how we think about ourselves in our personal lives is crucial. We don't exist in a vacuum.

So, on top of this capitalist, kind of, competition mode, we also live in a patriarchal society, and women are constantly being encouraged and taught to compare themselves to each other to evaluate their worth. So women are encouraged to based their worth on external things, first and foremost. There's physical appearance, the number on the scale, how shiny your hair is, how big your breasts are.

Then there's male validation – women are taught that their value lies in being attractive to men. So it's no wonder that we are constantly comparing ourselves to other women to see who is more attractive or who has more male approval or validation. If you think about it, you are probably constantly subconsciously scanning every room you are in and comparing yourself to the other women in it on the basis of appearance and conventional attractiveness.

I think this is so common and internalized, we don't even know we're doing it. I only really became aware of this when I made an effort to stop doing it. I hear this, especially from women who struggle with their body image and weight, that they're constantly scanning to see who's bigger or smaller than they are. Or you're scanning to see who's more conventionally attractive or not.

And you may not be someone who is attracted to men. You might be someone who dates women or who dates gender queer people or non-binary people. But it almost doesn't matter in the sense that we all grow up in this society that is massively hetero-normatively biased – which is

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created and structured mostly for heterosexual people – and which still teaches anybody who socializes as a woman to be massively concerned with what men find attractive.

And then what men find attractive also just becomes the default social norm. So if you're not trying to date men, you may not experience this quite as intensely, but this sort of social culture has still shaped the way that you evaluate yourself. And there are a lot of ways of seeking validation, right. It's not necessarily just how you look, it's also do they approve of your job, do they think you're one of the guys, do they like you as a friend – like whatever it is.

So, the point is that women, people who socialize as women, people raised as women, are particularly prone to the concept, to the phenomenon, known as compare and despair, because we are socialized to constantly compare ourselves to other women and to evaluate our worth based on those comparisons.

So between capitalism and patriarchy, your brain is primed to be constantly comparing yourself to other people. Now, that would not necessarily be a problem, right, if you compared yourself to other people but you didn't make any judgment based on it – it would just be like, "Oh, they have longer hair than me. Okay..." Right, it wouldn't mean anything.

The real question is why do you so usually find yourself wanting or lacking in that comparison. Why does it feel so terrible? And the answer to that is pretty simple, because you have an existing belief system about your own lack of worth. You already believe you are inadequate, and we know that the brain is constantly looking for evidence to support what it already believes.

So your brain is already wanting to find evidence that you aren't good enough. And then you teach your brain to constantly compare yourself to

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others. So what is the predictable result? You are constantly seeing all the ways that you are different that you can then use as evidence for being unworthy. So you believe that you are not pretty enough, you're not smart enough, you're not successful enough, you're not good enough. And when you compare yourself to other people, you assume that they are prettier or smarter or more successful and just better.

So why does any of this matter? Because you are conflating external circumstances with happiness. You think that because someone else seems prettier or has more money or is married or has kids or has a nicer house, or whatever else, that they are happier than you are. That's honestly all it boils down to.

Remember, the only reason we want anything is we think it will make us feel better than we do right now. We want it to ease pain or to create pleasure. So when you look at someone else and you tell yourself you'd rather be them, it's because you think you would be happier if you were them; if you had what they have, if you looked the way they look.

But external circumstances don't cause your feelings. Someone else having a thigh gap or a giant engagement ring or a baby or a house or a million-dollar business doesn't have jack-shit to do with whether they are happy. Their thoughts are what determine their happiness; same as you. And they are having all the same thoughts you are about the person next to them who has a bigger thigh gap or a bigger ring or more babies or owns two houses or a two-million-dollar business.

Now, some of you take it up a level in complexity and you tell yourselves that if you had the different circumstance, you'd think happier thoughts, right. My clients often try to convince me of this around the one-month mark of coaching, when they understand their thoughts create their feelings, but they haven't let go of the idea that they would be happier in different circumstances.

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So they just tell themselves that if they had the thigh gap or the ring or the job or the baby or the house or the business, then they would think happy thoughts; then they'd feel good about themselves. But remember what I teach about perfectionism. That shit is a lie. Your brain would not think any different thought if you magically were transported to a different body or a different relationship or a different life.

Your current brain would not think any different thoughts if you were in a different circumstance. We talk about this all the time on the podcast; you have all experienced achieving a goal and finding out you don't feel any differently, because you have the same brain.

So when you imagine, if I was this person, if I had that boyfriend, if I had that girlfriend, if I had that baby, if I had that ring, if I had that business, if I had that house, I'd be happy, I'd feel good about myself – what that means is that you think you would be thinking different thoughts. And you'd be telling yourself that the external circumstance would cause your thoughts, but that's not true.

The only way to feel better in this life is to change the way you are thinking. Now, some of you are also conflating external circumstances with worth. Compare and despair makes you feel terrible because you associate whatever those people have with them being worthier than you. You think if they're thinner they're more worthy, they're more disciplined, they're better people. If they're married, they're more worthy, they're more lovable. If they have a fancy job they're more worthy; they're smarter, they're more successful. So it all comes down to worth.

You are essentially using the circumstances, someone else's life, as a weapon to beat yourself up; but how they look or whatever they have has nothing to do with their worth. Often, it's just an external circumstance that happened to them. And sometimes it may be a result they created through their thoughts and feelings and actions. But thoughts and feelings and

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actions are morally neutral; they've nothing to do with your worth and they've nothing to do with their worth.

Nothing about what anyone has in their life has to do with how worthy they are, and it definitely has nothing to do with how worthy you are. You look at someone else's life and you make someone else's engagement ring or million-dollar business mean something about how worthy you are. What's going on in their life has literally nothing to do with you.

So compare and despair really boils down to two things to remember: you only want whatever that other person has because you're telling yourself you'd be happier if you had it, or you'd believe you're more worthy. Those are both just different ways of saying you'd feel better. You think you'd feel better if you had that thing.

But what creates happiness, what creates feelings of worth, what creates feeling fucking better, are your thoughts. You already have everything you need to be as happy or feel as worthy or feel as much better as you imagine anyone else does, and it is already all already in your own brain. If you took all the time and energy you spend comparing and despairing and you used half of it to practice your thought work and change your thoughts on purpose, I can guarantee you'd be happier than that other person that you're so busy envying.

Alright, my loves; think about that this week and I'll talk to you soon.

Thanks for tuning in. If you want to turbo-charge the Unfuck Your Brain Process, you can download a free five-minute self-talk makeover at www.redesignyourmind.com/selftalksoundtrack.