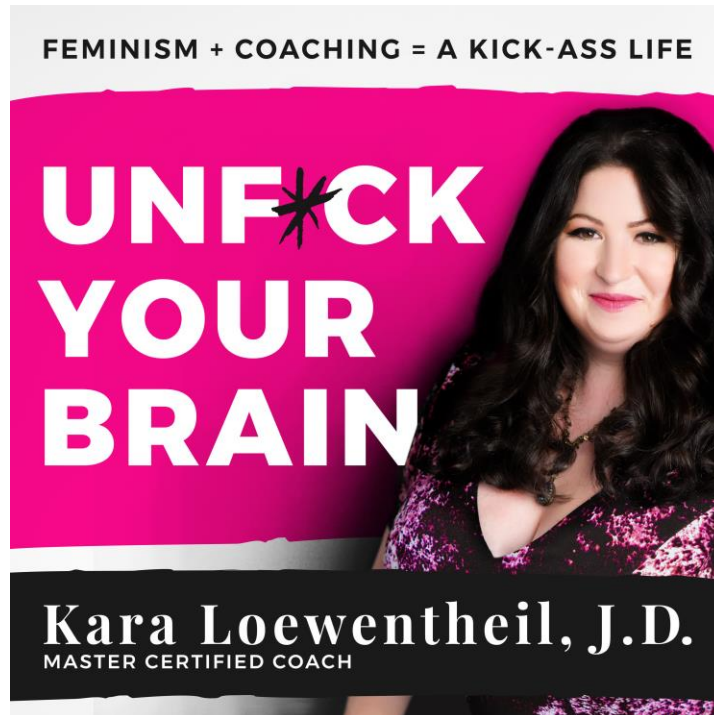


UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

[UnF*ck Your Brain](#) with Kara Loewentheil

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

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, chicky-chickens. This week, we're doing something a little different on the podcast. We're going to mix it up. It's almost our one-year anniversary; we can't just always do things the same way. So usually, I teach by lecturing to you guys – well, talking to you, but it's a one-way conversation.

Today, you are going to be learning through a two-way conversation. You are going to get to listen to about 20 minutes of me coaching a fellow listener totally live and unscripted without any preparation. You're really going to hear what's going on in her brain about a difficult person, let's say – or as she called them, an emotional terrorist, as you will hear in the recording – who's been really bothering her. For weeks, she's been struggling with this.

And we basically kicked that shit to the curb in about 20 minutes because coaching is magic. So all of you, I know, have someone in your life who is difficult for you to deal with, so you are definitely going to want to listen in and pay attention, even though I'm not lecturing, I'm coaching, you are still going to learn a ton that's going to be relevant to you and the kind of thoughts you have about the people that you interact with and have a hard time with.

And you're really going to see how we work through the surface set of thoughts you have, figuring out what's underneath them, what the real fear is, figuring out what the desires and compelling reasons to change them

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

are and then figuring out what new thoughts will work. It's a really powerful but efficient process.

So listen in, learn a lot and as a little bonus, if you've ever kind of wondered what coaching sounds like or what the hell happens when you get coached, this is what happens.

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Kara: Hey Vivien, how are you today?

Vivien: I'm doing okay today, yeah; I'm okay.

Kara: Okay, well we'll see if we can get that up to good by the end of the session. So just so everyone knows, you know that we're recording this for a podcast.

Vivien: I do.

Kara: And we're going to share it so that people can learn a little bit about what it's actually like to get coached. So I am just going to have you dive right in to describe the problem that's going on with you. I think it's something that will resonate with a lot of my listeners, so I'm really excited about this.

Vivien: So essentially, I'm a lawyer. I'm a civil rights lawyer. I deal with lots of different opposing counsel and recently there has been this opposing counsel who is very abusive and he just goes off in emails in a way that's very demeaning to my team and I. I should say at the outset that the opposing team is predominantly white men. My team is much more diverse with women, folks of color and people who identify within the queer spectrum.

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

So there is like already a power dynamic and usually, historically, I've been really good at being able to contextualize that it's actually good that he's losing his temper because that can be used against him. And there's all these positive things, but with this guy, I have this mounting dread.

Whenever I see an email from him in my inbox, I get paralyzed. I don't want to read the email. If I know I have to have a phone-call with him, it's just excruciating. It ruins my day. I'm not able to get things done during the day and I need to manage that because it's causing me to just be paralyzed whenever I have to deal with him. I have to deal with him all the time.

Kara: Yeah, alright, no we definitely want to solve this, for sure. Okay, so when you see an email from him – and you are a podcast listener as well, so you will know what I'm talking about when I say you probably already know there's something going on in your brain, right. You haven't even opened the email yet, we don't know what it says, but already, your body is like, "Fuck no. let's not look at that." So what is it you are afraid will happen when you open and read the email.

Vivien: So I think there's two things. I think one – he projects an air of confidence and so part of me is scared that I've done something wrong and it's going to hurt my clients and I have messed up. And then the other part of me is that I know there is this low-grade impact on my team of folks who I supervise and who I feel very protective over.

I know that they are experiencing this sort of terrorism too. And even like my co-counsel, like undermines his confidence and it has this, like, effect on everyone that I'm dreading.

Kara: yeah, so it's no wonder you don't want to open the email, right. So, I'm going to give you the good news and the bad news. Are you ready? The good news is, we can solve this. But the bad news is that you would have to be willing to give up some of your thoughts about him and how terrible he is.

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

Vivien: I'm willing to do that.

Kara: Okay, because of course there's no – what you're telling your brain is basically like that that email is a burning building. It's pain in there, there's puppies dying, like it's a terrible, terrible place. And so, of course, your brain does not want to rush in there, right. So you've got two sets of thoughts. One is that you fucked up, right, and that he's going to hurt all these other people.

So we need to take down the, sort of, initial pitch of fever anxiety when the email comes in. and so, in terms of the thought, "I've done something wrong," let's walk it through logically. If, in fact, there was an error – first of all, have you ever gotten an email from him that was a real mistake you'd made?

Vivien: No.

Kara: Okay, so how do you feel when you think, "I always freak out but he's never pointed out a mistake?"

Vivien: I think it's because this is a really complex huge case when there's a lot at stake. And so I wonder if he has a [long-term 0:06:26.3] plan. So like, for example, we've been having conversations about entering into settlement discussions and his position is so dug in that – I know, intellectually, it must be a posturing thing for him, but a part of me is like, "Does he know something I don't know? Did I miss an angle here? Is there something going on I'm not reading properly?" And that's the sort of fear I get.

Kara: Yeah, well part of what's going on here is because you're afraid you've done something wrong, you then project that onto him in the email, right. So if you were 100% sure that you had not done anything wrong, you wouldn't have this thought about his emails.

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

Vivien: Right.

Kara: Right, and the truth is, humans make mistakes. So I think one thing we want to work on is what would you think – like, you're afraid to find out you made a mistake because of what you'll think and feel. So what are you going to be – what's the kind of critical thought that you know you'll have about yourself if it turns out there was a mistake?

Vivien: I'm a bad lawyer. I've wrecked my client's lives. I've wasted resources; those things.

Kara: Yeah, just to start. I'm a bad lawyer; I've ruined people's lives and I've wasted resources. And I know – just the basics. And I know that a lot of my clients have these thoughts. and if they're not lawyers, they're doctors or – anybody can have these thoughts, right; some version of them. So this is the first thing we need to, kind of, solve in this equation is creating a thought for you that is a little more compassionate towards yourself and a little more solution-oriented, rather than being oriented to beat yourself up. Does that make sense?

Vivien: Absolutely.

Kara: Yeah, so can you think of – because this is a bigger issue. Like, the fear of making a mistake, he's bringing this up for you, but this is just going on in your brain all the time. So can you think of a prominent lawyer that you admire that you know who you also know has made mistakes?

Vivien: Yes.

Kara: And let's just give that – it doesn't have to be their real name, but what can we call that person?

Vivien: We'll call her Lilly.

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

Kara: Lilly, okay. So when you think, “Lilly is an amazing lawyer and I know even she has made mistakes,” how do you feel?

Vivien: I feel good.

Kara: So I want you to practice that thought. And there are variations of that. Like, even amazing lawyers make mistakes. All lawyers make mistakes. But it’s often good to pick someone that you admire who’s had a successful career and remind your brain, like, yeah, even that person – even Ruth Bader Ginsburg probably made mistakes. Every lawyer makes mistakes. It doesn’t make them a bad lawyer or a bad person.

Vivien: Right.

Kara: Right, so that’s the first thing that we want to practice, that it takes it down a notch. So okay, if you did find out you made a mistake, which you can also remind yourself, hasn’t happened yet – but if you did, that thought would help, like, okay. Because you can see, part of what’s going on here, even if he does happen to bring up a mistake, the truth is, it’s better to know, right. But right now, you don’t want to know because you’re going to make it mean something terrible about yourself.

Vivien: Yep.

Kara: So what else do you think to take the next step if there was a mistake and he was pointing it out, rather than jump on yourself about being a terrible lawyer. We know you’re going to think even amazing lawyers make mistakes. Even Lilly has made mistakes. And then, what do you think is the next thing you could think about the mistake having been brought up for you?

Vivien: How am I going to fix it?

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

Kara: Yeah, right, because you want to serve your clients, but actually what you're doing is creating so much emotional drama that it's actually diverting your resources from serving your clients. If you open that email and he's like, "Actually, you miscited this case," and you go into a tailspin about what a terrible lawyer you are, that's not serving your clients, right, and it feels terrible for you.

Vivien: Right.

Kara: So how does that feel so far?

Vivien: That feels just, like, revelatory. Like, so simple but very calming.

Kara: Exactly. So even good lawyers make mistakes and if I have made a mistake, it's better I find out about it because that's how I can help my clients.

Vivien: Absolutely.

Kara: We just take perfection off the table because nobody's perfect. So if that's not an option – you are, for sure, going to make a mistake at some point in your career, of course, you want to find out about it sooner rather than later. That's how you help your clients.

Vivien: Right.

Kara: And that way, you'll have more – you'll be able to see the solution. If half your brain is occupied with beating yourself up, you won't see the solution. And you won't have a real sense of whether it's actually an important mistake because, of course, opposing counsel is going to love to call out any mistake they could find. But if your brain goes to, "I'm a terrible lawyer," then you're like, "You're right. It's a disaster." Whereas it might be,

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

like, “Oh, we both know that doesn’t matter, Bob. Who cares? It’s really not an issue.”

Vivien: Right.

Kara: Okay. So that’s that one. And I think that also addresses the, like, he’s going to hurt my client because the truth is, for you to show up to do your best for your clients means not thinking these terrible things about him. It means managing your own emotions and your brain so you have the most to offer them.

Vivien: Right.

Kara: And the same is true for your team, right. So I think we might need to dial-down the term terrorism. I’m glad you used these because this is how people think. So I really appreciate that you were totally honest, like, “This person is committing genocide in my email.” Like, that’s how you feel.

Vivien: I’m very protective of those who work for me and I want them to feel energized and inspired and not torn down.

Kara: But how do you think you best inspire them by having a nervous breakdown every time you get an email?

Vivien: No, like I am always very, with them, like, “We have to just ignore him. This is good for us. We’re going to eventually attach these emails to the court and that’s going to be great.” Like, I really do try to frame it for them in the most positive way I can. But it just takes so much out of me, I think...

Kara: Yeah, because you’re trying to white-knuckle through it; that’s why. You’re like, keeping your belief that it’s awful and then trying to put on a stiff-upper-lip for the kids.

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

Vivien: yeah, that's right.

Kara: That's going to be exhausting. But if you've changed your thoughts – I love that you want to be there for and protect your team. At the same time, you can't 100% control their thoughts and feelings.

Vivien: Yes, exactly.

Kara: Right, this guy doesn't control your thoughts and feelings and you can't control your team's thoughts and feelings. But just like children or animals, your team members can sense when you are actually quite perturbed and trying to, like, ra-ra through it.

Vivien: Yeah, definitely I think that's right.

Kara: Yeah, so what would actually be a better example for them that would help them more?

Vivien: Talking to them about how the email, like – trying to unpack it. I mean, I want to be careful be their therapist, but trying to unpack it in a more productive way.

Kara: Yeah, I think also just modeling for them that you don't – you're not becoming their therapist or coach, but how you act is a model, right. You're their supervisor. So, like, modeling for them it's possible to be a civil rights lawyer without being consumed by anger at opposing counsel all the time is a way better model for them.

Vivien: yes, totally.

Kara: So I'm just trying to show you that you managing your mind is actually a way that you can serve your team.

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

Vivien: I think so. I think that's actually great.

Kara: And the good news is, you can control that, whereas you cannot control what this dude's going to do. So we don't want to give him the power to impact what kind of a boss you can be to your team.

Vivien: That's right. That's right.

Kara: So when your brain says, "But he's hurting my team with his terrorism," what can you think instead?

Vivien: I need to, like, go back to my positive thinking so that I'm reflecting that to them.

Kara: Yeah, think, I'm reflecting – I think you could think something like – how could you phrase it as, like, "My job as a team leader is to," what?

Vivien: Is to model healthy thinking about the stakes in this email.

Kara: Yeah – how do you feel when you think that?

Vivien: I feel like I have, like, a mission. Like, that feels good. Because it's always helpful for me to, like, think about it in the context of service and so that's helpful, yeah.

Kara: Yeah. I just got little chills, which is what I get when I client is on the right track for them. So that's a good sign. My weird body compass liked that. It's true, it's so weird. I'm a little bit of a witch I think. Yeah, I love that. and that is such a gift to them because nobody else – everybody around them, most people, are reactive because they don't know how to manage their mind, right.

Vivien: Right.

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

Kara: So like, you also agreeing with them that he's a giant asshole is like – it's like candy. It feels good for a minute, but overall, it doesn't feel good. I mean, a little bit of candy is delicious, but like...

Vivien: You don't want to get a stomachache.

Kara: Yeah, your kid's entire Halloween haul in one night, right. Like, a little bit is delicious. But then in the end, it doesn't get you anywhere, right. And none of what you're doing is, sort of – it's not about like excusing him. Whatever, it's just not about him at all. It's like he can blaze and bluster and rage; it's like a hurricane. But like, you are inside, you know how to keep your perimeter; that's what matters. That's what your team will see too.

Vivien: Yeah. I think it's interesting. We had this one call once where I was trying to, like, keep cool and I kept referring to him as sir, and I really regretted having done that in front of the team because I think it reflected a bad dynamic. But at the same time, I was trying very hard to, like, not get angry or upset because – so I was trying to manage those two things at once and that was really difficult.

Kara: Yeah, that's what happens when you try to white-knuckle through, right. You're like feeling mad, but then trying not to feel mad and then you get weirdly obsequious. It's like just a whole – trying to cover it up – it's just a whole confusing mess. Whereas, if you go in clear, whatever you call him is going to sound fine, it's not going to matter. It's just going to be, like, "Okay, Bob, well this is what we think." It's totally because you are coming from this place of being like, "I hate you but I'm trying not to hate you, but I have to pretend to be respectful to cover how much I hate you so then I call you sir, but then I have thoughts about that," right.

Vivien: Exactly.

Kara: That's the unmanaged mind creating a whole mess. Beautiful...

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

Vivien: I'm just thinking about it because I think I get dread a lot in interactions, so I feel like I need to say, like, "What am I really scared of? What's the worst-case scenario here? And even if the worst-case scenario happens, how bad is that? And then what can I tell myself to fix that?"

Kara: Yeah, and it's not about telling yourself, like, deluding yourself, right. It's about, like, removing all of that self-criticism and shame and judgment; that's the emotional drama, right. The math is like, Okay, we got this result or this thing happened. This witness said that or this thing came up in that deposition, or we did miss a case. We miscited something," whatever. The worst thing that happens – whatever the mistake is, even our clients lost. Whatever it is, the math is just like, okay what do we do next? Do we appeal? Do we file a 28J? Like, what do we do? The drama is all of the self-hatred self-criticism stuff and that makes you a worse lawyer, not a better one.

Vivien: Yes.

Kara: We think beating ourselves up makes us a good person, but it doesn't. It's just painful. And we think, by doing that, we show that we care about our clients, but really, that's just all self-involvement. And I don't mean that in a, like, there's something wrong – not in, like, you're a bad person, way. All of our brains do that. But the real service is being like, my own thoughts about myself are not the issue here, right. That's just drama that I'm creating about myself that I don't need to. I'm a good lawyer; what are we going to do now?

Vivien: That really resonates with me actually.

Kara: Yeah, perfect. So that's always a good question to ask yourself. Whenever you're like, what am I afraid of, the truth is, what you're afraid of is the mean thoughts you'll have about yourself. Because if you really believed, like, "I did my fucking best. I showed up for my clients. I did

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

everything I could. I managed all the pieces I could manage. The result wasn't what we wanted for reasons that are outside of my control." That doesn't keep you up at night.

Vivien: No, I think part of – when I'm good at my job, I'm able to just – I'm the best at my job when I can say, "All I can do is all I can do and the rest of it is up to chance." And I'm the worst at my job when I'm always like, "Why is this guy getting to me so much?" And I don't know the answer to that, but I absolutely know that I'm the best. When I've had to work on cases where lives are at stake and, you know, very, end of, things, I've always been good at doing that. But here, for whatever reason it's, like, gotten to me.

Kara: Yeah, well certain people, like, you know – I don't like to say they trigger us because it's our thoughts, but like, there are certain people who make your brain go to – you know, your brain goes to a certain place when it encounters them sometimes. But that doesn't mean that we still can't manage it on the inside. And it's like, who knows, some of that shit is so subconscious.

It could be subconscious in your mind of your second-grade teacher or something. Who knows? Or like, his tone is the one your dad used. Who knows exactly why? In this particular situation, your brain has been like, "Oh, let's use these terrible thoughts." But it doesn't really matter, right. We can just be like, "Oh, interesting, you are somebody where I have to do a lot of thought work around you, but that's cool. I'm learning a lot by doing it.

Vivien: Yeah, and the why, like, it's an interesting thought process, but it's not actually that helpful.

Kara: yeah, because it's not about that person. It doesn't matter why really. You know, only in so far as – if the why comes easily, then sometimes it's helpful just because you use that as a thought for yourself. You can be like,

UFYB 21: Toxic Work Coaching

“Oh right, whatever opposing counsel is 6’4 with brown hair, I freak-out. Like, that doesn’t mean I need to believe these thoughts. That always happens.” You can sort of like use it as a thought for yourself if it’s easy to figure out.

But if it’s not, who cares? It’s much better to spend that – that’s one of the differences between coaching and therapy. I don’t really care. I just want you to spend that energy on changing the thoughts you have now. I don’t want to like explore your family history to see why this guy sets off the thoughts. Let’s change the thoughts. We just did it in 20 minutes and it feels a lot better.

Vivien: Right, no, completely. Oh, that’s really helpful.

Kara: This is my favorite thing about coaching clients. Even when they think it’s going to be helpful, then it works and they’re like, “Whoa, that actually works.” Well thank you for sharing your story and your coaching and letting everyone see what they can get out of this process. And I think, actually, the substance of it will be super helpful because a lot of people struggle with the same thing, whether it’s opposing counsel or their manager if they’re in a corporate job or their stepdad. Whatever it is, it’s the same thought process. So thank you for sharing.

Vivien: Thank you. I really appreciate it. This was really helpful.

Kara: Awesome.

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.