

UFYB 26: Taking Responsibility for Other People's Feelings



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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. I want you to know that this is, like, the 10th take of this intro. I cannot – I don't know what is going on. It's been like a bloopers reel over here. I'm just trying to get started. It's just been, like, a whole situation. But alright, I feel like this is going to be the one.

So, what I want to do today is give you a little bit of a peek, kind of a sneak peek of the kind of teaching that I do in *Unfuck Your Brain*. So here on the podcast, of course, I teach you a lot of topics; all sorts of ways to manage your mind and understand what's going on in your brain. And then in *Unfuck Your Brain*, we really take that learning to the next level; it's like 2.0.

And so today, I wanted to give you a peek inside of *Unfuck Your Brain*. So I'm going to teach you a little bit more of an advanced level topic. And that is taking responsibility for other people's feelings.

So, I talk on the podcast a lot about how other people don't cause your feelings and that's like emotional adulthood 1.0. But today, I want to talk about how you don't cause other people's feelings. And that is really emotional adulthood 2.0.

Your feelings are created by your thoughts. Other people do not cause your thoughts and they do not control them. We talk about that all the time. By the same token, you don't create other people's thoughts. and this actually seems to be harder for my clients to internalize; even when they

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understand that other people don't cause their thoughts, they still have trouble understanding that they don't cause other people's thoughts. they're not responsible for them.

And I think that's because women are so deeply socialized to take responsibility for how other people feel; that we're supposed to make other people feel good and make a social situation feel friendly and we're supposed to make other people feel valued or are supposed to make men feel good about themselves. There's a whole list of things we're supposed to make other people feel.

But the truth is other people's thoughts come from their brain. They don't come from you. Their story, their model, is running in their brain just like in yours. So think about all the times that you have had a story about yourself or someone else, sort of, that sets you up to interpret what someone else said or did through the filter of that story.

So you have a story about yourself, let's say that you're not good enough. And then when someone else gives you a compliment, it doesn't necessarily make you feel good. You just run it through your own story and disclaim it. Or if you think that someone else is an asshole, they may just say hello to you and you assume it's them being condescending because you have that story about them.

The same is true for other people's brains. Other people have their own stories, their own narratives, their own biases and their own thought patterns that determine how they think and feel. You are always just a circumstance that someone else is having a thought about; that's it.

You don't cause other people's thoughts; you don't cause other people's feelings. You are always just a neutral thing in the world for someone else's

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thoughts and feelings. So you exist or you say something and then they have a thought about you and they have a feeling, or they have a thought about themselves and then they have a feeling.

You can't possibly control how they interpret what you say or do. And in fact, it sometimes changes day to day. Think about how sometimes you can say or do the same thing and the same person will react totally differently on two different days because they're having different thoughts. Like, think about somebody who sometimes it's okay to joke around with them and make fun of them a little and they laugh along and then sometimes they get super mad.

The difference isn't you. You didn't cause the laughter and you didn't cause the anger. The difference is whatever their thoughts are. One day, they're feeling okay about themselves and they think it's funny and then the next day they're feeling bad about themselves and then they get really reactive.

Or think about sometimes you say or do one thing and two different people interpret it in totally different ways. Think about different relationships you've been in where something you did with one partner was totally fine and then something you did with another partner would really set them off or vice versa.

You used to be with someone who would get really mad when you did something and then you do the same thing with a new partner and you're braced for the anger and then they're just totally chill. It's because their thoughts are different. You're always just the circumstance in someone else's mental and emotional model.

It doesn't matter if this person tells you that you create their feelings; they just don't know that that's not true. If someone had cancer and told you that

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you created the cancer in their body, you would not believe them because you know that you don't control the cell division in their pancreas. But you don't control the thoughts and feelings either.

Other people do not create your thoughts and feelings and you don't create other people's thoughts and feelings. So I think the more interesting question is why are we so hell-bent on taking responsibility for other people's feelings? And I think it's because of what we make it mean about ourselves if we don't; if we don't take that responsibility and if we do.

We're taught, growing up, that caring about someone means that you make them have good feelings and that you don't make them have bad feelings. It's completely baked into the emotional model that we are taught. And we're taught that people who do not change their behavior based on what other people think and feel are bad people. We're taught they're selfish, they're self-absorbed, they don't care about other people, so we're completely socialized to think that if someone tells you that they don't like what you're doing or that it, quote en quote, makes them have a thought or feeling that you need to change your behavior for them to feel okay and if you don't then you don't care about them and you're a bad person.

I mean, the way that most people think and talk about romantic relationships in particular is so, so down this rabbit-hole. That if your partner doesn't take responsibility for your feelings – this is something people straight up will say. “Well I'm mad; he just won't take any responsibility for my feelings. That's what makes him a terrible partner.” “She won't take any responsibility for my feelings; so that's why I can't date her.”

It's crazy-pants, you guys. You are not responsible for other people's feelings, but we're totally taught that we are. And you can see how this

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could be maybe even useful in the evolutionary sense. If you live in a close-knit small tribe, sticking together is really important. So you need everyone to work together and if everyone else in the tribe wants you to stop hogging the best cuts of meat or something, it makes sense that you would go along. You know, if you didn't, you'd probably be left behind and die on your own.

So biological evolution may have selected, for those of us who are particularly susceptible to feeling shame about this kind of thing, and then social evolution has created a cultural understanding that we cause other people's thoughts and feelings and that we should feel bad when we do.

But none of that makes it true. Honestly, just because everyone else thinks it, doesn't make it true. And here's the thing; the whole reason that we're so attached to taking responsibility for other people's feelings is because we want to be able to feel that we're good people.

If we just detach and don't take responsibility for other people's feelings, then we tell ourselves that means that we're lacking empathy or we don't care or we're not being a good wife or sister or mother or daughter or friend or partner or employee or boss, right.

But none of that is really about them; that's all about you. Believing that you cause other people's feelings actually does not make you a kinder nicer person. This is one of the many things about the brain that we all have completely backwards. It actually makes you way less kind and nice to yourself or anyone else.

And this is why; when you believe that you cause someone else's feelings, that means you can't feel okay about yourself unless they feel the way you want them to. Okay, are you with me? When you believe that you're

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responsible for someone else's feelings and that if they feel badly, you take responsibility for that and you're like, "Oh I'm the reason they feel badly," and then your brain says, "Well, if they feel badly because of you, that means you're a bad person," now you're super invested in trying to force them to not feel bad anymore so that you don't have to feel bad anymore.

If them feeling bad and telling you that they're upset with you means that you have to think you're a bad person then you're going to be real invested in them changing their thoughts and feelings so that you can stop thinking you're a bad person. If they're upset with you and you agree you are responsible, then you shame yourself and then you can't feel okay until they stop being upset.

But you can't make them stop being upset, which is hilarious because it actually proves that you don't cause their feelings. This whole thing is premised on the idea that you caused the original feeling of them being upset, but then you're not able to make them stop being upset, which if you actually caused their feelings, you could make them stop being upset.

Just think about how often you or someone else is upset with someone and it doesn't go away just because they apologize. We have all had those fights. We've been on both sides of those fights. Like, if we get really riled up and we get really angry – and even if the other person completely capitulates and apologizes immediately, we're still fucking pissed because we're still thinking the same thoughts.

If we think you not answering my phone call means you don't care about me and I'm not worth it to you and that makes you feel terrible, when the person says, "I'm so sorry, you really mean a lot to me," you don't feel any better really because you're still thinking, "If I meant so much to you, you'd pick up the phone."

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You're still totally believing your thoughts; totally believing that the other person is responsible for them and so even though they apologize, you still feel shitty because you're still having the same thought. If they truly could cause your feelings then them apologizing would solve the problem, but we've all been on both sides of that. We've all been the person who's still fucking pissed even after they get the apology, even after the person has totally given in. We want to beat that into the ground.

And we've been on the other side; we've been the person who completely apologizes and it doesn't seem to make any difference. All of that actually proves that we don't cause each other's feelings.

And then here's the next level; then you start creating all this resistance and resentment. So if someone else says to you, "You hurt my feelings; I'm sad and you made me sad." If you agree that you are responsible then your next thought is to basically tell yourself you're a bad person for making them sad.

So now you're deeply invested in them not being sad anymore you want to cure their sadness so you can feel okay about yourself again. But you can't make them un-sad even if you apologize; they may still say they're sad and that you caused it because they're still thinking thoughts that cause sadness which you can't control.

And so now, they're still sad and you now feel guilty and that guilt makes you feel resentful and then that makes you resistant and wanting to control them. So they tell you that you caused their feelings, you accept that responsibility, now you're really invested in them changing their feelings. You can't control if they change their feelings and now you're resistant and resentful that they won't change their feelings so you can feel better.

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You're so up in their drama. Other people don't cause drama for us, we cause it for ourselves, but you sort of insert yourself into the drama in your own head by taking the responsibility for that feeling and then resenting and resisting. You resist that responsibility because now you're using it to make you feel bad about yourself. And then you get upset with them for not changing their thought and feeling fast enough so that you feel okay again.

It's a vicious cycle; there's no upside to it. None of that is you being kind. It's just a shell game where you're both trying to change the other person so you can feel better. Do you see what I'm saying? You say to yourself, if somebody tells me that I hurt their feelings and I think, "Well that's just your thoughts," if I don't take responsibility for that then I'm being a bad person.

It's very important for me to take responsibility for this so I can be kind and show myself as a kind person who cares. But the way you actually think and act when you do that is not kind because it becomes not about them at all; it becomes about you and what you're thinking about yourself and then trying to manipulate them and rush them out of their feelings and change their thoughts so you can feel better.

It's the opposite of kindness. True kindness is when you can have compassion for someone else's suffering even if you know that their thoughts are creating it and even if you had nothing to do with it. What's really fascinating is that when you're in emotional adulthood, you can actually apologize for anything; it's amazing.

Like, no matter what someone says to me that I did that they don't like, I feel totally fine just being like, "I'm so sorry you didn't like that." And I really mean it; I'm so sorry that you didn't like that because I don't take responsibility for their feelings. I know I didn't cause it. I know it was a thought in their brain.

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So because I don't take responsibility for it, I don't have to resist it, right. It's not my problem. But thinking it's not my problem actually makes me much kinder because I can have that compassion for them. I can hold that space for them. I'm not trying to change them. I'm not resisting that they have this thought or feeling about me. I'm not making it mean anything about me.

When you make someone else's thoughts and feelings mean something about you then you're defensive and resistant; it's the opposite of being kind. You want them to change those thoughts and feelings. When you take emotional responsibility for yourself but not for other people, you are so much more present and so much kinder. You are so much more able to bring compassion and kindness and love to other people because you allow them to think and feel whatever they want.

You're not trying to change that. You're not making it mean anything negative about them or you. Now, you not taking responsibility for other people's feelings may not be what they think kindness is – although interestingly, your vibe and your energy will change so much that actually often people, even though they think they're mad at you, will feel that difference. But maybe they won't. You can't control that, but you will feel so much more kind. You will feel so much more loving. That's the whole point. That's all you can control.

So when you take emotional responsibility for someone else, then you're getting super enmeshed in trying to control them and change them because you're making it something about you. You're making it mean something about you and then you're creating resistance and resentment and then you're trying to change them. None of that is true kindness.

True kindness, true compassion, true love is allowing people to be exactly how they are, recognizing that they're allowed to think that you cause their

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feelings, even though you don't. That's not a problem; they can think that. and you're able to show up with so much more compassion and love – you're able to hold the space for their experience without being defensive or reactive at all. And that is so much kinder than buying into the illusion that you can do anything about what they think and feel, which you truly can't.

So, that is a deep teaching. If you just started this podcast and you're like what the fuck is going on, you may want to back up listen to a few earlier episodes. But I wanted you guys to get a sense of what the deeper second-level kind of teachings are that we do in *Unfuck Your Brain* so that you see what the next level of this work is. I guarantee you, it just only gets more mind-blowing.

So if you want to hear a little bit more about all that, you can just go to www.unfuckyourbrain.com/program and you will be able to check out all the details about the areas that we work on. And for the rest of you, I want you to go forth this week and only take responsibility for yourself.

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.