

UFYB 32: Ask Better Questions



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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 now here's your host, Harvard law school grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello, my chickens. So it is summer. I am recording this from Dallas and it's 105 degrees here, which I just don't think that that's acceptable. It's so hot. So I've been in Dallas for about 24 hours, but so far it is very Dallas. My hotel has a cowboy hat in it in case I left mine at home, and there is a quote from President Bush on the mirror and on the ceiling. So that's definitely a first.

So I'm here getting ready to teach at The Life Coach School training, which is awesome. Super excited to be here with my fellow coaches and my teacher, and you know, I trained here a few years ago so it's really kind of wild to be on the other side of it.

So today I want to teach you one of the best tools I learned from my teacher, and that is the power of asking better questions. Most of us are unconsciously asking ourselves terrible dead-end questions all the time.

Like, "Why do things have to be this way?" "Why is it so hard to change?" "Why doesn't anyone love me?" "Why are my colleagues so terrible?" "Why are my parents so critical?" "Why is my kid so misbehaved?" "What could I have done differently?" "What would my life be like if I had not left that job or taken that job or not left that partner or gotten married or gotten divorced?" Right? If I made different decisions.

These questions do nothing for you. They're essentially unanswerable. And the problem is that they accept your premises and your thoughts as true. Your problem isn't that you can't figure out why your boss is an asshole. Your problem is that you think he's an asshole in the first place and you believe that thought.

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Your problem isn't that you can't figure out why you're not married. Your problem is that you think it's a problem that you're not married and that means something about you. Because these kinds of questions assume the premise of your thought or that the premise of your question is true, they will never lead you to a solution. You will never figure out a satisfying answer to them.

They are unanswerable so they keep you ruminating forever. But you never ever get resolution and you never get an answer. You just keep swimming around in the negative feelings and negative thoughts caused by those questions.

And once you ask your brain a question like that, you cannot stop thinking about it because the human brain does not like unanswered questions. Your brain thinks unanswered questions are dangerous. Any unknown to your lizard brain could be something that's going to eat you. The unmanaged mind does not do well with uncertainty. You may have noticed this about yourself.

The human mind doesn't want to think there's anything out there that it doesn't know about that could be a threat. It's the same reason that risk and change and the unknown are all such a trigger for emotional drama. Because evolutionarily, your brain doesn't want to think that there's anything it doesn't know. The unknown could always be something that will kill you. that's what your brain thinks.

So if there's an unanswered question out there, something you don't know, it's going to obsess about it until it can determine if it's safe. What those questions are asking it, that determination never comes.

The opposite of a dead-end question is a powerful question, and a powerful question has a positive or at the very least, a neutral assumption baked in.

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It gives rise to productive action, or to more positive or neutral emotion. Or ideally, both.

So examples of powerful questions are what are the next three steps I can take to move me towards my goal? How much evidence can I find that I am loved? Why would I be a great catch for someone? How do I want to think and feel about this situation? How can I create what I want? How could I make this more fun? What is the solution to this problem? What is perfect about this?

You can see how all of those questions, number one, contain a positive or a neutral premise, and number two, they prompt your brain to come up with positive outcomes or thoughts. I also like to play with something I learned from a coaching colleague called affirmations.

So it's kind of a silly name but bear with me. So an affirmation is like an affirmation but it's asked as a question to stimulate your brain to come up with positive responses. So you guys know I don't really teach affirmations because I think that if you are trying to believe a positive affirmation that you don't believe yet, it's actually counterproductive because you don't believe it so you don't get any emotional payoff, your body doesn't feel any different, and then you just sort of lose hope and you're kind of worse off than when you started.

The reason that I think affirmations can work where affirmations don't is that you are not telling yourself to believe a thought, you are asking yourself a question that your brain will then find reasons to answer. And when your brains finds the evidence to answer it, you will be able to believe it.

So examples of affirmations are why am I so lucky? Why am I so grateful? Why am I so successful? Why am I so sexy? Why does my partner love me

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so much? Why am I so proud of my kids? Why am I such a good doctor or a lawyer or executive or wife or mother or daughter or friend? Right?

So the affirmation version that wouldn't really work would be like, I'm lucky, I'm successful, I'm sexy, right? You don't believe those yet, so those don't work just stating them like that. But when you ask them in the form of a question, your brain will look for reasons to answer it. It's just automatic. So we're basically using your brain to your advantage against its bias for the negative itself.

And the questions sound kind of funny when you read them in a list but if you try using them, you will find that they stimulate your brain to come up with reasons. Remember your brain doesn't like an unanswered question. It wants to think that it knows everything already. So you ask it a question that will prompt self-affirming responses.

So when should you use this tool? It's important to understand that you won't always know that you are asking yourself a dead-end question because sometimes it's subconscious. But any time you're feeling anxious or guilty or hopeless or self-pitying, that's a good time to check in with yourself and see what questions are rattling around in your brain.

Any time you're in emotional childhood where you think that other people control or cause your feelings, or things outside of you, you probably have a few dead-end questions up in there. And any time you notice a dead-end question, you can change it on purpose to a more powerful question.

You can also use this tool when you aren't asking yourself a question, but you're thinking dead-end thoughts. Any thought about not knowing how to do something for instance, can be changed into asking yourself a powerful question instead.

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So for instance, if your brain says I don't know how to move forward, you can ask yourself, how can I move forward? Or what would I need to do to move forward? Or what's the next thing I would do if I knew I would succeed?

If your brain says I don't know how to do this about something, you can ask it something like, what are the next three steps I would need to take to learn how to do this? Or what would someone do if they knew they could figure this out?

I know this sounds simplistic, but I really urge you to try it. You'll be blown away at how your brain automatically responds, even though a minute ago it was telling you the opposite. Honestly, a lot of what I do as a coach is ask people questions that they haven't thought to ask themselves. And sometimes those are unexpected and a lot of the magic of coaching is that I put things together and make connections and ask questions that never occur to you to help you understand what your thoughts are and why you are acting the way you are.

But sometimes my questions are kind of obvious, and it's just the act of turning it into a question that prompts my clients' brains to get going. So I use these questions in my coaching all the time.

Any time you are feeling stuck or ruminating on a dead-end question or fixated on not wanting things to be the way they are, stop and ask yourself a better question. Your brain wants to answer questions. So rather than feed it unconscious negative questions, choose to feed it conscious powerful questions instead. Use the machine up in there to your advantage.

So by the time you guys actually hear this, I will finally be back from the surface of the sun, otherwise known as Dallas, and getting ready to start talking to people about the next round of Unf*ck Your Brain, which is my

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six-month coaching program that teaches you how to rewire your brain to overcome socialization and self-critical thoughts so you can get what you want in life and actually enjoy having it.

Some of you feel like stuck and not knowing how to move forward in your life to get to the life you want, and then some of you feel like you have the life you want but you don't seem to enjoy it the way you thought you would. I saw both those problems in Unf*ck Your Brain.

So if you want to learn more, you can check out all the information about the program. It's at www.unfckyourbrain.com, Unf*ck Your Brain without the second U, politely. www.unfckyourbrain.com/program. I just graduated the first class of students who went all the way through the program, so long six-month program, and it was absolutely unbelievable to see the results of their experiences.

And I will be sharing some of those stories with you soon because they just blow my mind and I think you guys are going to love them. Alright y'all, if you're someplace that's 105 degrees, stay cool. And if you're someplace cold, stay warm, and I will talk to you next week.

Thanks for tuning in. If you want to start building your confidence right away, you can download a free confidence cheat sheet at www.karloewentheil.com/podcastconfidence.