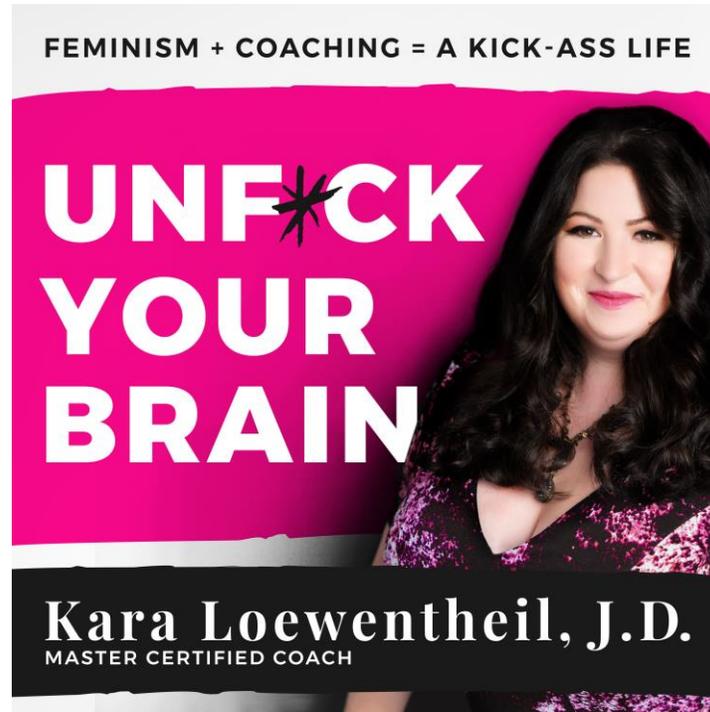


UFYB 33: Gratitude



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.

Chickens, my chickens, how are you guys? So I'm back home now, for a few days at least, and I was kind of bracing myself for hot humid summer New York City, right. It's been like 50 degrees and raining all week; so much for summer in the city. I was just thinking about how I have all this travel planned this summer and it's so fun to think that I might be walking down the street in a random city somewhere and I might pass by one of you without even knowing it.

Maybe that's already happened. Maybe we've walked by each other and we didn't even know it. I'm also going to be going to a podcasting conference, so hopefully I will come back from that with lots of good ideas to make this podcast even more awesome.

So while I was looking at my calendar thinking about all of these things I'm going to be doing and I just started thinking about amazing it is that I have created this life for myself where I can take off and travel wherever I want – apart from my 15-year-old cat who needs someone to hang out with him – and I can do my job from anywhere. He doesn't like to travel – you know, within reason on the time-zones...

Anyway, all of that, I was just feeling so kind of filled up with gratitude and it got me really thinking about gratitude because this is an emotion that I have kind of complex thoughts and feelings about. I think that gratitude is really hip these days in a kind of self-help empowerment idea way. Like, everyone on Instagram has a gratitude journal, from what I can tell.

And there are lots of great reasons to cultivate gratitude for sure, but I also see my clients trying to use a gratitude practice against themselves in a

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way that isn't helpful and can actually be kind of harmful. I see that in my clients and I saw that also when I was training some baby coaches recently. so it just made me want to talk to you guys about how to think about gratitude.

So that's what I'm going to teach today; I'm going to teach you about how to actually cultivate gratitude but also how to know if you're misusing it, which you actually can do. So, what is gratitude? It's essentially just the feeling of being grateful and being thankful. And at its best, gratitude is a true appreciation of really just how lucky we are to be alive, right, and to have whatever blessings we have. And I don't mean blessings in a religious way.

If you're listening to this podcast, the chances are that your standard of living is better than 90% of the world's population. You probably live in a house where clean drinking water comes out of the tap all the time whenever you want it. That's a luxury that most of the world can only aspire to and will never experience. Talk about something to be grateful for.

But that's not how we think about it, right; we don't even notice that kind of thing. And there are centuries of Buddhist teachings and, more recently, brain imaging studies that show us that cultivating gratitude for what we have can be really powerful. It impacts our mental state, our mood, it even impacts our physical health. And I think that makes sense.

When you're focusing on appreciating what you have, you feel warm and expansive in your body, right, you feel good. You may think that you're lucky. When you're focused on what you don't have and you're thinking from a place of scarcity, you feel constrained and desperate and terrible.

So I understand why so many women turn to gratitude practices as, kind of, part of their self-improvement work. And I'm not against that; I have totally assigned gratitude lists to my clients myself. But I think it is so important to

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really understand why you're focusing on gratitude and what you're trying to get out of it because what I see in my clients is they often try to layer gratitude on top of a negative feeling; like it's a stain solution that will remove whatever's underneath.

They use gratitude as a weapon against themselves so they have a negative emotion, whatever it's about, and then they respond to the negative emotion by shaming themselves with the thought that they should feel grateful and they try to produce gratitude that way. I think that last week, I coached three women on the same pattern in the span of about three hours. It's so pervasive.

So let me give you an example. Let's say that you're feeling angry that your partner is coming home late and your thought is that they don't participate in the household labor and that they don't participate in household life and they work too much and you feel angry. But you don't think you should feel angry. You don't want to feel angry. So instead of actually trying to get to know that anger instead of sitting with it and really looking at your thoughts and deciding on purpose if you want to keep them, you just try to plaster over that anger with gratitude.

So you just tell yourself that you should feel grateful that your partner works so hard to provide for your family, but it doesn't really work because you don't feel grateful. It's possible that if you really believed that thought about how hard they work and why in a vacuum and you started with that thought, you might feel grateful, but you can't just layer it on top of your negative thought. You have to deal with the underlying negative thought.

Or let's say you're a boss and you have lots of negative thoughts and feelings about your employees and those thoughts create anger and frustration for you. You're thinking, "Why can't they just do what I tell them? Why can't they do their jobs? Why is it so difficult?" You're asking yourself dead-end questions, like last week's podcast.

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So you have these thoughts that they should be doing a better job and they're screwing up and those thoughts create anger and frustration for you, but you don't want to feel those things. You don't want to get to know those feelings.

You don't think you should have them, so you tell yourself that you're grateful that you have a successful business. But, weirdly enough, you don't feel better. And that's because you haven't dealt with the underlying thought. Gratitude is not the solution because it doesn't solve the actual problem which is you believing all of your negative thoughts.

Whatever you're telling yourself to be grateful for, you might actually feel gratitude about it if you were thinking that thought authentically, but it doesn't work when you're trying to use that thought to cover up some other negative emotion. Then it's not really gratitude.

You can't shame or should yourself into gratitude; that's not how gratitude works. When you do that, you're just using it as a weapon against yourself. You're not going to feel grateful when you're using it this way. You're going to feel stressed out and ashamed and sorry for yourself and you won't even really know why.

Anytime you tell yourself that you should feel grateful, it's the should that is kind of the operative powerful word in that sentence and should just produces obligation and shame, like any other should. Anytime you are telling yourself you should or should not think or feel a certain way, you're creating a moral value on it. You're creating a feeling of obligation and then you're creating a feeling of shame for not living up to that obligation that you just mentally invented.

So if you notice that you're telling yourself that you're grateful but you don't actually feel grateful, it's likely because you're trying to use gratitude to spackle over some other feeling or thought that you aren't acknowledging.

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And usually, that's because you either aren't willing to have the feeling that you're having or you think your original actual negative thought means something about you. So in other words, if you're afraid that the thought you have about your partner or your employees means that you are an ungrateful person, you're going to be afraid of that.

You have this meta-thought about your thought. At first you think why can't they get their shit together, you feel angry, then you think, "Oh my god, I'm a terrible person. I shouldn't think that way." Then you feel ashamed. And then you think the solution is to try to be grateful instead. You're trying to plaster over it with gratitude.

But really, what you want to do is look at your thoughts and feelings, see what's in there and notice that you don't have to make that mean anything about you. If you feel angry at your kids and then you have the thought that being angry at them makes you a bad mom, you may try to cover that by telling yourself that you're just grateful your kids are healthy, but that's not true.

You do have a negative thought and feeling. You are mad at them. You do feel angry and just telling yourself that you should be grateful or that you are grateful and not dealing with that underlying emotion isn't serving you. You're not really changing your thought because you're not willing to sit with and acknowledge the thought underneath.

So instead of dealing with your anger, instead of really getting to know the thoughts causing it and deciding if you want to keep them, you've just layered shame on top of the anger and then you've layered false gratitude on top of the shame. That's just a mess, so no wonder you don't feel any better.

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You cannot shame yourself into gratitude. You cannot use the existence or non-existence of gratitude in your body to determine if you are acceptable or not. Gratitude is just an emotion.

It's not like an elevated moral status; it doesn't make you a better person. You don't get an award at the end of your life if you feel grateful a lot. It's literally just a physical vibration in your body. And for most people, it feels warm and expansive.

It's just a feeling. It's created by your thoughts. It feels amazing, but it doesn't mean anything about you as a person. It has nothing to do with who you are as a person or what you have to think about yourself.

So if you want to experience true gratitude, you have to take it down of the pedestal. It's not a moral requirement. It's not a spiritual obligation and it's not a workaround for managing your actual thoughts. You can't try to spackle gratitude on top of negative emotion to get rid of it. You don't have to feel grateful. You get to decide how you want to think and feel.

And if you do want to experience true gratitude, you have to be willing to be present with your negative emotions. What if you were grateful for being a human with all the mess that comes with it? What if you were grateful for not being perfect? What if you were grateful for your imperfection, for your humanness, for all those negative thoughts and feelings and the tools to work on them?

If you could be grateful for all of that, then you could really be present with yourself. The most important thing is to be honest with yourself about what you're thinking and feeling. Don't make any thought or feeling unacceptable or mean anything about you. When you do that, you can't ever tell yourself the truth and you'll try to paper over your true experience with emotions that you think sound better. That's the opposite of being grateful for your life and grateful for yourself.

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Okay, my chickens, that was short, but deep. This is deep stuff. Last thing I want you to know – applications are open for the next round of Unfuck Your Brain, so come check it out because I'd love to work with you and teach you all this and more – www.unfckyourbrain.com/program. Talk to you guys 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.