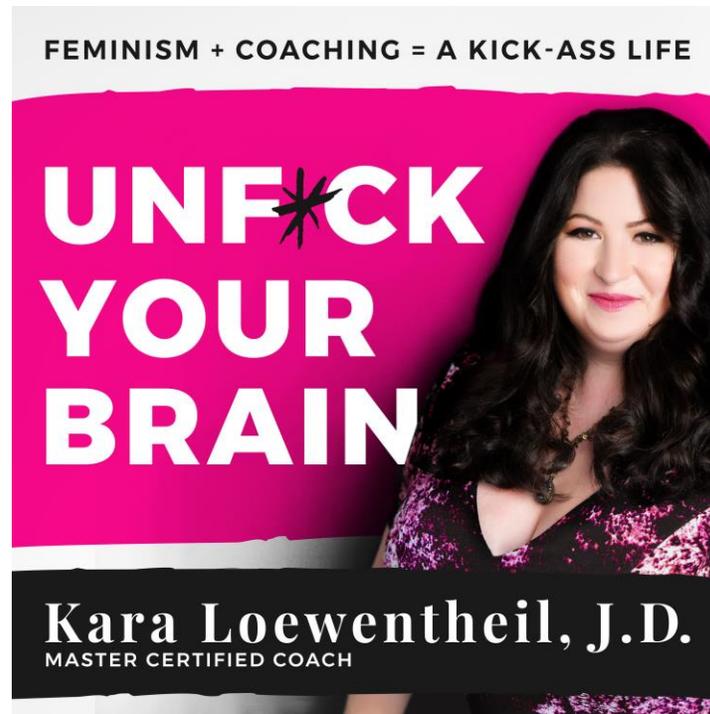


UFYB 36: Antidotes to Perfectionism (Other Focus + Minimum Baseline)



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *Unf*ck 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, here's what I want to tell you guys first today; I want you to know that I practice what I preach because I am always talking to you guys about learning to move towards discomfort and that growth requires doing things that lizard brain would rather avoid. Like courage requires the presence of fear to exist, right. We wouldn't have courage, we wouldn't need to be brave if we weren't afraid.

So that is one of the reasons that we want to move towards discomfort, right. We have to do that if we want to grow because lizard brain always wants to stay safe in the cave. So here's how I have been dealing with that the last few days. So my brother was running for a state delegate position in our home state and I was down there earlier this week to help canvas and stand at the polls in the last few days.

And let me just tell you, my brother and I are like all the proof science would ever need that nature is more important than nurture. I mean, obviously in some ways, not others. Of course, I teach we can change our thoughts, but if you don't change your thoughts, we grew up with the same parents in the same household, but the idea of talking to strangers is, like, my nightmare, unless they're my client and they're going to tell me their deepest darkest secrets.

So talking about feelings and thoughts and deep stuff with total strangers, I'm all in. I love it. I'm super comfortable. Making sort of superficial level conversation with strangers is not my favorite thing in the whole world. I am an introvert. And canvassing is like a cocktail party to the tenth degree because you're not at a party where everyone has come there voluntarily knowing that other people might speak to them.

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You are knocking on stranger's doors and your brain, at least, is telling you that you're asking them to do something, to vote for your candidate. So you know how excited I personally am when a stranger knocks on my door to sell me something? I am not very excited about it.

And poll work means standing outside a polling place trying to hand literature to strangers as they go in to vote to encourage them to vote for your candidate. So my brother was knocking doors and talking to strangers for over a year in his district. I'm incredibly proud of him and I'm also completely baffled that someone would pick this as a voluntary career, but that's the good news; that there are people in the world who do want to do that.

Anyway, I went down to Baltimore to volunteer and help him because one of my values is to show up for my family when I can. And I knew I would learn something also about myself and it has been a fascinating exercise for my self-coaching because at first, I didn't want to do it. And then, I felt guilty and resentful, even though my brother put zero pressure on me. He never said anything to me about it. He invited me to come down, just like he invited all of his friends and family. That was it.

Nobody was telling me I had to. I was putting the pressure on myself because my parents and some of his friends were going down for days or even weeks in the months before the election. So first, I had to coach myself about that because, of course, my emotions of obligation and resistance were not coming from him. They were not coming from what I was going to do. Knocking on doors is just a circumstance. They were coming from my thoughts that I, quote en quote, should go down there to help him and that if I didn't I was a bad sister. That's what my brain was telling me.

So first, I had to give myself permission to truly make a choice. And I coach my clients about this all the time; you are always making a choice. You

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have a choice. You always have a choice. Even taking care of your kids is a choice. There are people in the world who don't take care of their kids.

Now, you might say, well I would never do that, and I'm sure that's true, but it's still a choice. You're still making a choice to do it. So I had to remember that kind of foundational piece of my self-coaching, which is I am always making a choice. I am not a victim of circumstance; I'm always making a choice. If I didn't go, I was the only person I was going to have to deal with. My own thoughts and feelings about myself, if I didn't go, were what I was truly worried about. Nobody else was saying anything to me. It was just what was going to happen in my own brain.

So I gave myself true permission to decide. Like truly, it was okay if I decide not to go. And I decided I was going to go down, and then I had to repeat this whole process, coach myself about how I was only going down for two days. Once your brain gets a hold of an idea like this, you sometimes have to coach yourself on multiple layers.

So I told a friend I was doing this and I told her I was going down, but with all the self-coaching, I said, "Oh I'm going down just for two days." I'm sure I said just for two days, to minimize it. And she just said, "Oh you're such a good sister." And I was like, wait, I could choose to think that.

That thought is available to me. I could choose to think that I am a good sister rather than thinking I'm a bad sister because I'm only doing two days. It's the same situation. I'm going down to help canvas and do poll work for two days and I can either think I'm a great sister. I'm really showing up for my brother. I'm taking time out of running my business to go do this thing that makes me uncomfortable and I have to coach myself about. What an amazing sister I am.

Or, I could think, I'm a terrible sister because I'm only doing it for two days. Same circumstance, same set of actions that I'm about to take, I could

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have two totally different thoughts about it. And you can imagine, like, how I'm going to show up, right. If I'm telling myself that I'm obligated, I'm resentful, am I even going to be any help to my brother? What is my vibe going to be if I'm knocking on a door or making a phone call or standing outside the poll and giving someone literature if I'm believing all my own thoughts? If I'm believing that I'm a bad sister, if I'm believing that doing this is terrible, if I'm believing that it's awkward, all that shit, I'm really not of service at all.

I could go down there for two weeks, and with that set of thoughts, I would probably do less good for the campaign that I could do in two days with my brain in the right place. So I'm telling you guys this story because it's a perfect example of how perfectionistic thinking fucks with our brains, and that relates to the topic of this podcast, which I'm going to get to in a minute, called the minimum baseline.

My brain was saying, while your mother's been down there multiple times for several weeks, you're already failing. And I was focusing on that rather than celebrating the fact that I had actually decided to make a choice in line with my values and giving myself credit for that. The thoughts, I'm a bad sister and, I'm a good sister, were equally available to me.

And here's the other thing that you guys really need to understand. It's not about, like, fooling yourself. Those thoughts are equally true because there's no true objective way to evaluate that. We don't get like a certified letter from the universe that's, like, a good sister would go down for 3.7 days; any less than that is a bad sister.

There's no objective standard. Some people might think I'm a bad sister for going for two days and some people might think I'm an amazing sister for going down there at all. The only thing that determines if my actions are those of a good sister or a bad sister is a human mind; someone else's human mind or my human mind. Only our brains – our brains are the only

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things that make that evaluation. So they're just two different ways of describing the same situation and I get to choose which one to think. And like I just explained, I can see which one of those is going to produce a better result, both for me, but also for the person I'm supposedly trying to help.

So that was the emotional drama I went through before I even went down there. And then when I was down there, I had to kind of resolve all that stuff about being a bad sister, but I still had a lot of dread about doing the thing. I had a lot of thoughts about how it was going to be uncomfortable and awkward and people weren't going to want to talk to me and blah, blah, blah.

And so I really, again, was like, I need to coach myself about this. Just so you guys know, I coach myself all the time. And so, I was like, what can I learn from this. So I was observing my thoughts and it was so fascinating to see what the thoughts creating the discomfort were because, honestly, one of the best things about thought-work is that in any situation, it's an opportunity to learn more about your brain and yourself.

You don't have to be a life coach to think this way. Any of you who are practicing this work, if you pay attention to your brain you will always learn something in any situation. It's like silver lining to any challenge. So I was watching my thoughts about why it was awkward and uncomfortable and a lot of them were that whole, like, I'm a bad sister. I'm not doing enough. When I got rid of those, I probably reduced it by like 80%.

But I still had this little bit of, "Ehh." So I wanted to figure out what was going on there. And what I saw was that the thoughts I was having were really similar to the thoughts I see my clients have about selling if they're new coaches or entrepreneurs. So my main thought was, I'm asking these people to do something for me without giving them anything.

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It's so fascinating because actually that's not true. I'm not asking them to do anything for me. I was asking them to think about voting for someone else. But also, I'm offering them information that they might actually want or need. Like, some of them might not want it, but some of them might genuinely not know about a delegate race or be confused about who the candidates are or actually have questions about my brother's platform.

I have no idea; some of them might actually want this information. And I don't even benefit based on who gets elected. Emotionally, this is my brother, but I don't even live in this state. So I'm asking them to do something that I truly believe is in their best interests because I know my brother and I know what a dedicated public servant he is and I wouldn't campaign for him if I didn't believe that.

So I'm offering them information they might need and I'm giving them an opportunity to do something that's in their best interest. It's so interesting because that is a parallel to coaching. Any kind of business you're in, if you're offering people something they need, some people may not want it, but some people do want it and some people need it and sometimes it's to their benefit.

So I just changed my thought from, I'm asking these people to do something for me without giving them anything, too, I'm offering these people information that may help them make an important decision that's to their benefit. And that totally changes my feeling about doing this.

And so here's the overall lesson in this, because I see this in my clients all the time and not just in entrepreneurs; not just in coaches, but really in everyone. When you focus your thoughts on yourself, you will feel awkward and guilty and resentful and angry and all these negative emotions that don't serve you. When you focus your thoughts on how you're being of service to other people, you will feel free, when you truly make that choice.

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This is not the same as doing what everybody else wants you to do out of obligation and guilt. That's a totally different thing. But I see new entrepreneurs and coaches have this problem all the time, but it's not just them. I think about the lawyers I coach and the doctors I coach and the architects that I coach and the nurses I coach and the women of every profession, really. When your thoughts are focused on am I doing a good job, do my clients or patients think I'm smart, am I screwing up, do they think I'm doing a good job, do they think I'm helping them, am I doing a good enough job – when you're in that headspace you just feel terrible and you do a worse job.

When you change that thought process to be about your clients, again, like whether you are selling sex toys or selling coaching or you're a lawyer or you're a doctor, whoever you are, if you're interfacing with other people who you're serving in any way, when you change your thought process to focus on them, how can I be of service to this person? It's a totally different ballgame and it really cures perfectionist thinking because perfectionist thinking is all about yourself; am I being perfect, right.

Service thinking is not about being perfect. Your question is just, am I helping this person? Am I serving this person? I have a client who – part of her work is speaking to large groups of people and she was having a lot of procrastination and stress before doing these talks and one of the things we worked on was changing her thought from, am I going to do a good job, are they all going to like it, is it going to be perfect? Probably not, it's not going to be perfect, nothing's perfect.

And is everyone going to like it? Probably not because you can't control all their brains and if you've got 200 people, odds are they're going to have some different opinions. So we change that thought to, my job is just to connect with one person in this audience.

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I used to use this all the time when I did speaking engagements. My thought was always if what I am teaching is helpful to one person in this audience then I have done my job. And that's honestly how I thought as someone in the audience too. Like, when I went to professional conferences, my thought was always, like, if I learn one thing here that's helpful then it was worth it.

And honestly, that thought worked when I was an academic – like if I have one idea here or if I connect something here or if I learn a piece of information about a case that I could use in one of my papers, it's worth it. And it's totally the same with coaching. If I take this course, if I learn one thing that really helps me, then it was worth it.

It just lets all the air out of these perfectionist tiers. So, when you think about things as being about you, you're going to feel very locked up and perfectionistic. When you change the focus to be how can I serve this person, how can I be of help to this person, it really relieves a lot of that pressure.

And if you are someone – because I know that a lot of entrepreneurs and people in business listen to this podcast also – if you are one of those people, you really want to try using this because a lot of the reasons that people – women – hate selling whatever they're selling, whether they're a lawyer selling their services or actually a coach trying to get clients, is because their thought about it is that they're asking someone for their money.

And humans have evolved to a very strong disinclination to ask for something without offering something in return. We are predisposed to worry a lot about reciprocity. If you do a favor for someone, they're subconsciously compelled to try to give you something in return. So if you frame anything to yourself as you're asking someone else for something that benefits only you, you will feel terrible about it.

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But when you change the focus to offering someone else a service or value they may need, it's totally different. And I think one of the reasons my business grew so fast is that my thought about consultation calls was always, I'm offering people the secret to life, and I truly believe that. So it never felt like selling at all and any price always felt like a bargain.

And any price is a bargain because it's literally the secret to life. And I think that's why – it's not like I – I have had to coach myself, of course, about consultation calls and I didn't have a sales background and some of it is a skill you have to learn, but really, 95% of it is your mindset. And I think that one of the reasons I was successful very fast in my industry is that I truly believe that. I truly believe in the value of what I'm offering. I know it because I used it to change my own life and I know I would – knowing what I know now, I would have paid any amount of money for it.

So it really never felt – it was never like – I'm asking someone for their money for my benefit. It was like, I have this thing that's going to change your whole life, of course you should want it. Why would you not? It's the best investment you could make in your whole life.

Alright, so that was like a whole podcast in and of itself, but I just have been thinking a lot about my self-coaching this week and I really wanted to share it with you guys because I think it's maybe easy for some of you to think that because I do the podcast and I'm a master coach and I've been doing this for a while, my brain just 100% behaves itself now, and that is just your perfectionistic thinking setting unrealistic goals for yourself and making it seem like the destination is too far to even bother.

So I really want you to know that that's not the case; I've just learned how to manage it with a lot less drama. I've been at my mastermind with some other coaches this week and one of the other coaches and I, our motto for coaching businesses was, you can make a lot of money with a half-managed mind. But that's true for anything in your life, whatever it is. You

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can be an amazing doctor with a half-managed mind. You can make partner in a law firm with a half-managed mind. You can run an architecture firm with a half-managed mind. You can become the editor of a magazine with a half-managed mind. Even just managing your mind by half, you can find the love of your life. You can have an amazing marriage with a half-managed mind. You can be a great parent with a half-managed mind.

We're not going for perfection. If you just, like, manage your mind half the time, you can have an amazing life. Alright, so now I'll switch gears a little bit, teach you the concept of the minimum baseline because that's what I titled this podcast episode. So even though I just did a whole podcast on self-coaching, basically, let's just keep going. You can listen to this in two parts in you want.

So here's the idea of the minimum baseline. And it's a pretty simple concept, but if you really internalize it, it will change everything for you. And it does relate to this self-coaching inner selection story because the minimum baseline is the antidote to perfectionism. So maybe I should have called this episode antidotes to perfectionism. I guess I still could actually. Anyway, we'll see. Who knows what this is called by the time you listen to it.

So one antidote to perfectionism is taking the focus off of yourself and focusing on other people. The minimum baseline is the second antidote. So perfectionism tells you that you need to do everything all at once and perfectly. And the minimum baseline tells you that you need to choose one thing at a time and do it a little bit consistently.

So perfectionism is, I have to campaign for months. I have to be campaigning for my brother as much as the person who's doing it the most or I'm worthless. And minimum baseline is, I can come down for two days and campaign for three hours each day and if I really have the right mindset, that can be helpful and that's enough.

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Perfectionism is, I have to eat strictly Paleo or I'll never lose weight and look good. Minimum baseline is, I'm going to make one meal a day Paleo for a month, then add a second meal and work on that for a month, then add the third meal and work on that for a month.

Perfectionism is, I should go to barre twice a week and yoga twice a week and lift weights and run a marathon. Minimum baseline is, I'm going to go to one yoga class a week until that becomes completely effortless and habitual and then I'll add a second class to the week and repeat the process.

And I wanted to teach this tool this week because last week, when we were talking about planning, or two weeks ago, I cautioned you all that perfectionist chickens like to make totally unrealistic plans and then never keep them. It's practically the perfectionist signature hobby. And because you're always doing that, you lose the ability to rely on yourself.

You lose the integrity with yourself, not because you're a terrible person, but just because your brain is driving you to make unrealistic plans that you can't possibly keep. And then of course, since you don't keep them, they just become more and more abstract and they stop really being actual plans. You can see that, right.

The more you make unrealistic plans and don't keep them, the more making plans becomes like this theoretical activity. Most of the time, you already know that you're not really going to do them. But making them gives you this brief respite from your self-critical talk about not doing enough. And that's really the rub because that's where the unrealistic plans come from.

When you're putting your self-esteem on your eating plan or your exercise plan or your work calendar or whatever else, you're making it impossible to succeed. You actually can't. It's too much weight to put on it. Because

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you've put your self-esteem on it, you then think whatever it is, your workout plan, your eating plan, your work goals, your whatever, because you've put your self-esteem on it, then you think it has to be perfect for you to feel okay about yourself because you're a perfectionist.

And because humans aren't perfect, it's never perfect. And then, when you can't keep to your perfect plan, you say mean things to yourself and you feel terrible. So then you need a new plan to try and feel better about yourself, so you make another perfect plan and you assure yourself that starting tomorrow you'll be perfect.

So the cycle goes on and on and on and every time you make a perfect plan and don't follow it, you get farther away from your own relationship with yourself and your own ability to make and keep commitments to yourself. And then you use that as more evidence that you're a bad person lacking in discipline. But you're not. You're misunderstanding why you can't stick to your plan.

Your problem is not that you don't have any discipline. Your problem is that you are staking your self-worth on the plan. So the first thing you have to do is separate your self-worth from the plan; any plan, whatever it is. Your self-worth cannot depend on how much you workout, what you eat, how much work you get done, anything else. And we talk about self-worth on the podcast all the time, so I'm not going to talk more about that today.

But I want to teach you the second part of it, which is that you have to practice the minimum baseline. And you're not going to like it because it's not going to give you the big dopamine rush you get from imagining your pretend perfect self who has the perfect diet exercise and work calendar, right.

The minimum baseline is going to seem boring and pointless, but it's the exact opposite. The minimum baseline is how you build an actual lasting

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habit and develop that kind of integrity with yourself. It's how you develop the kind of relationship with yourself where if you'll say you'll do something, you know you'll do it. You don't get there with ambitious perfect plans. You get there little bit by little bit.

Think about your relationship with someone else; if you meet a stranger and they immediately declare their undying love, you would not trust them. That's weird, right. If they're like, "Let's go to Paris for two weeks together. I just met you today." You'd be like...

Instead, when you meet someone new, you make a new friend or even a new romantic relationship, you build trust through the little ways that you show up for each other over time. They make plans to meet for coffee and they show up for coffee. When you text them, they text you back.

Small consistent actions over time is what builds any kind of relationship, including your relationship with yourself. So whatever area you're working on, your minimum baseline should be the smallest commitment you can make that you know you can follow through on. And when I say you know you can follow through on it, you're going to have to manage your mind to follow through probably. I don't mean that you could follow through without ever managing your mind, but it just should feel doable when you set it.

You shouldn't have that secret knowledge that you'll never actually do it. You really need to think to yourself not what would I like to do, but what can I actually see myself doing? So for example, your minimum baseline might – if you're trying to create an exercise routine, your minimum baseline might start honestly with just taking a 20-minute walk three times a week, or a ten-minute walk three times a week.

And perfectionist brain doesn't like that. It seems boring and pointless, but it's not. If you actually go for your walk three times a week consistently, you are doing way more for your body than it does to make elaborate plans,

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buy a gym membership, go every day for a week then not go for four months and then start the cycle all over again.

The point of the minimum baseline is not even to get results so much as it is to build consistent habits and trust with yourself. You will get results over time in whatever you're working on, whether it's writing a novel or increasing your cardio fitness; whatever it is. But you can't focus on the results because then your brain will say, if we want that result, let's do this perfect aggressive plan instead, which you'll never actually do.

So you don't focus on the result. Focus on the relationship you're building with yourself and focus on the idea that if you do these small actions consistently, you will build both the habit you want to have and the relationship with yourself.

There's a book called *The Slight Edge*, that I've talked about on the podcast before because I think it should be required reading for perfectionists. And it's all about how what makes people successful in anything isn't the big actions, it's the small day to day actions they take consistently over time. And when people start to succeed and plateau or they succeed and then fail, it's actually just because they stopped taking the small consistent actions because they didn't realize that that's what created their success.

So if you think about it with, like, a daily small mindset practice. If you did five or ten minutes of thought-work every morning, your whole days would be different. You would make all these different decisions. You would feel differently about yourself. You would act differently. You would show up differently. Your whole life would change. And then six months later, you'd start attributing all of that progress to the actual actions you took and you'd think, now I'm so much busier and I'm so much more successful and I don't have time, I don't need to do this mindset practice; so you'd stop. I want to sleep ten minutes more...

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And then, over time you'd stall out or actually things would start to get worse and you would be confused. You would think, well I didn't really change anything, why is this happening? Why am I suddenly getting angrier? Why am I procrastinating more? There must be something wrong with me. I'm self-sabotaging.

Actually, what happened is you stopped taking that small daily mindset practice action that you were taking that was, like, lighting the match for all the rest of the success. You stopped lighting the kindling; you just started trying to set giant logs on fire. It doesn't work.

So that's what happens. Most people who fail who start succeeding and then plateau or fail, it's because they stopped doing the small practices that were creating their success without even realizing that's what they needed to be doing.

Okay, so the last thing I want to say about the minimum baseline is that I really recommend you use it on one area of your life at once. Perfectionist brain wants to be on all the wagons or off all the wagons, but that's overwhelming and it makes things way harder; so pick one thing to work on at a time. Write your novel, create a movement routine, eat more vegetables, get more sleep, whatever it is, pick one thing to work on your minimum baseline.

I really want you to think about this, you guys. You can easily spend a year trying to change everything all at once and falling on and off the wagon all year and you just end up where you started. You've gone through several cycles of boom and bust, and at the end of the year, you still don't have consistent routines or you still haven't made the consistent change or you haven't made progress.

But if you picked one minimum baseline to work on per quarter, spent three months working on one thing and then three months adding a new thing

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and then three months adding a new thing and then three months adding a new thing, you'd have four new very solid habits by the end of the year. So really think about that.

If you try to learn how to run a 5K, eat vegetables at every meal, get eight hours of sleep every night and not check Facebook during the workday and you try to do those all at once, you're going to be overwhelmed. You're trying to change too many things. This is what happens with New Year's resolutions. And you'll do it all for a week and then it will all fall apart. And then three months later, you'll be like, I should do that again. You'll do it all for a week, it will all fall apart. Like, once a quarter, you'll decide you should do it and it will go for a week or two and then it will all fall apart.

But if you put one of those in each quarter – if I said, this quarter, all you're doing is focusing on adding a vegetable at every meal, it sounds too simple and it's no big deal, so perfectionist brain doesn't want to do it, but it's actually so much more effective. And then next quarter, you can work on the 5K once eating the vegetable is totally habitual, then we're going to add the 5K.

At the end of the year, you'd have each of those habits totally ingrained. It would make such a difference. So one minimum baseline at a time, make it achievable, make it far less than perfect and commit to showing up for yourself. Massive action your minimum baseline and that will change everything.

Alright, my chickens, I hope you enjoyed this longer multi-part podcast and I will talk to you again 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.karaloewentheil.com/podcastconfidence.