

UFYB 39: Reaching Your Potential



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

Hello, hello, my chickens. So I am having one of those days when – you know those days you just have a really hard time bucking down and getting your shit done? And often when this happens, it's a sign to me that either there's some unexplored thoughts I have to deal with, of course, like I always do a Model and see if I'm avoiding my thoughts for some reason. Sometimes it means I haven't been taking enough breaks, so I've just been trying to push myself too much and my brain is just fried.

But occasionally, there's just no good reason. I don't know what it is. I slept, I ate, I'm not burned out. It could be hormonal. It could be the moon and the stars; I have no idea. Whatever reason, my brain just does not want to settle down today. But I'm telling you this for a reason, because number one – I want to reassure you that yeah this happens, even to me.

Perfection is not the goal. So I no longer experience what I used to experience all the time, which y'all are still experiencing all the time, which is kind of stressed out procrastination and dread. That used to be my dominant working emotional state and I really don't experience anymore. It's kind of like a faint memory at this point, which is so crazy.

But yeah, I still have trouble focusing and getting stuff done once in a while, but what's really different is how I treat myself about it, right? I don't beat myself up. I don't catastrophize. I don't make it mean that I'm wasting my potential and I'm never going to succeed in life and I don't torture myself with, like, this vision of what life would be like if I was perfectly efficient.

And so that's kind of the reason that I want to tell you this, an addition to being transparent about the fact that I'm not perfect and that that's totally

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fine and the big difference is how I treat myself, I also want to talk today about potential because I think we really misunderstand what potential is. What is our potential? What does that mean?

So I want to teach you a better way of thinking about living up to your potential. And I think it's actually a deep topic because it has a lot of ramifications for how we think about the past and the future and what we can achieve. Our thoughts and feelings about our potential are really bound up with our story about what we've been like in the past and what we should be like in the future.

So one of the things I hear my clients say a lot is that they feel like they are not living up to their potential and they usually feel a lot of shame about this. It's like a weapon that they use against themselves. I remember feeling this way and one of the things that was super interesting for me was that I was both right and wrong about that.

Like, I was right in that I knew that I wasn't working to my full capacity, which I wasn't because I didn't know how to manage my mind. I didn't know that was the problem at the time; I just could tell that I had more potential, more capacity, than I was using, but I also couldn't figure out how to do anymore because I was so stressed and burned out.

What I didn't realize was that that little kind of tug or feeling that I could be doing more, that knowledge, that was really holding me back was not, like, being a terrible person, which is what I thought was the problem, but not knowing how to manage my mind. I had to use all my mind management tools – like I had to do all the thought coaching – to get through all the stuff that was in the way, of what would other people think and what would I really want to do and what was possible for me. Like, I had to clear all that up to fully live into my potential.

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But most of us are not even there, we're just using not living up to my potential as another thing to criticize ourselves for and beat ourselves up for. It's just one in the whole litany of mean things that we say to ourselves. And we kind of rarely stop to figure out what that potential actually is or how would we even know if we'd lived up to it. We just always assume we're not.

And so the other day, I heard this idea about potential that really blew me away, so I want to share it with all of you. I was at a mastermind gathering and my teacher said, kind of offhand, "Well you can never live up to your potential because it's always in the future."

That just blew my mind. Like, I wanted to press pause on the whole situation. I wanted to just be like, "Nobody talk for a minute. I need to think about that." I've been thinking about it a lot because my clients suffer from so much shame about not living up to their potential or not being where they should be, quote en quote.

And it doesn't matter what area of life it is, we apply this to our career, our body, our love life, our family. My students always feel that they're behind. They're not where they should be. They always believe that they're not living up to their potential. And I think this is such a brilliant reframing of what potential is.

It's not even a reframing, it's more like actually digging into the meaning of potential as opposed to just using it as shorthand to beat ourselves up because potential has to be in your future. Potential can only exist in the future. So your potential has to always be in your future because that's what potential is. You can never be living up to your potential because potential is, by definition, something you could be but aren't yet.

That's what the word means. Think about it; potential is something that's currently latent. It's not yet fully expressed. That's why it's potential and not

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reality or actuality. A bud has the potential; to become a flower. It is not yet a flower. Once it's a flower, it does not have the potential to become a flower, it already is one.

So you can never live up to your potential because it's always in the future. And unlike a flower, we don't have two states; bud, flower, dead – that's three. You always have more potential to grow into. You're supposed to. You can never live up to your potential because your potential, by definition, is always some future growth and evolution that you have not exceeded yet.

And thank goodness, right, life would be so sad and depressing if there was nothing left to learn or develop or explore. If you were fully embodying your potential, that would mean this is it. This is the best, most expansive, most accomplished, most happy version of you and nothing will change from now until you die. That seems depressing to me.

I don't want that to be the case. I always want to be growing and learning and exploring and evolving. So I think this is so freeing. You're supposed to have space to grow into. You are supposed to have undeveloped potential. At any moment in your life, you are supposed to have the potential to develop into something more.

So I think this links up so nicely with a concept that I'm probably past due for teaching on this podcast, which is the difference between past and future focus. And I think that when we think about our potential and what we can create or become, it's completely related to how we think about the past and how we think about the future.

Most of us live focused on the past. We've a long litany of ways that we've been hurt or failed or traumatized or screwed up or abandoned and we tell ourselves long stories about our past; either our past was terrible and so our present is terrible, or our past was better but we lost it and so now

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we're sad. No one focused on the past feels awesome about their current day life.

And the most insidious problem with focusing on the past is that when you focus on the past, you let the past determine your future. Now, perfectionists are interesting in this regard because perfectionists have kind of a two-track thing. They have a thought about their future perfect self, their potential, this future self where they would eat perfectly and exercise perfectly and look perfect and act perfectly and work perfect and be perfect in all the ways and finally be happy. But then they have a whole story about their past and how that's not possible and they're never going to get there.

And so perfectionists kind of hold these two things at the same time in their minds; feeling constrained by their past, not believing they can ever change and yet holding out this dream illusion, really like this oasis illusion of this perfect future person who's going to be happy all the time and will solve all their problems.

The problem with focusing on this perfect future person, of course, it's that's completely unobtainable, you never get there, and so it becomes an excuse to just not even try. You just give up. You fail ahead of time on purpose because you know you can never be perfect. And the problem with focusing on the past is that you will repeat the same mistakes that you've made in the past, even if they're not mistakes.

I think for some people, seeing them as mistakes is actually helpful. Like, "Oh I've made a mistake. I can change." For some people, just thinking about past mistakes is just another way to beat yourself up. So you don't have to call them mistakes. Whatever you did in the past, whatever actions you took in the past were caused by your thoughts.

So if you don't change those thoughts, you'll keep taking the same actions, you'll keep getting the same results. And a lot of us do this unconsciously.

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We assume that whatever happened in the past is what determines our real future. So it's almost like for perfectionists there's like ideal future, which I know I'll never reach, and there's real future, which will be exactly the same as the present. It's like all or nothing.

And I think culturally, we're really taught that the past determines the future and we even have sayings like past performance is the best predictor of future performance. And we hear that and we nod because it makes sense to us, right. We think we have that saying, the past is doomed to repeat itself. But that's really only one way of looking at the world.

Yeah, often the past has repeated itself because the people who created it kept thinking the same thoughts. Your results come from your thoughts. so if you think the same thought now as you thought in the past, you're going to get the same results.

But you could also look around the world and see how many new things are being done every day. I mean, just honestly stop and think about all the things you use every day that had never existed before someone became convinced they could be done and tried over and over to make them happen, that before electricity was invented had never been done, before the internet was invented, it had never been done.

Before humans flew, it would have seemed impossible – and the Wright brothers failed a lot before they succeeded. So not only were they trying to do something new that seemed to everybody else impossible, but they failed multiple times, yet they kept trying.

They kept believing it was possible. They didn't say to themselves, "Well humans have not flown for millennia, so probably it won't happen." They were like, even though no one's ever flown before, I know I can do this. I know this is possible even though I have no evidence for it, even though

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the past would tell me it isn't. I know it is, I believe it is and I'm going to keep trying until it happens.

And you yourself have done many things that you couldn't do before. You learned to walk. Before that, you only knew how to crawl, but you figured it out. Most of you learned a profession or a trade. You learned how to read and write. You learned how to drive a car. You have already changed throughout your life in ways you could never have expected, but you tell yourself that you've always been one way and that you can't change, and that keeps you stuck and repeating the same thought patterns and getting the same results.

One of my favorite thoughts to use when I'm thinking about past and future focus is the idea that what happened yesterday is as over as Ancient Rome. I think that is mind-blowing when you really think about it because we don't think that that's true. We think what happened yesterday is still kind of changeable if we think about it a lot. We think what happened yesterday or last week is worth spending a lot of mental energy on.

We think it's worth constantly thinking about why it happened and what we did and what did the other person do and why should it have happened differently and why shouldn't they have done that and why should we have behaved differently. We think it's worth spending a lot of mental energy on what happened yesterday.

Unless you're an archeologist, you don't spend any mental energy on what happened in Ancient Rome. You're not like, well, they really should move that Parthenon over. That was the Greeks actually; sorry. Oh my classics teachers are roiling over in their graves. You get my point, right. You're not like, oh the Roman Senate, they really should have decorated it and why did Cassius say that thing.

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You don't think about that, but you obsess over your own past because you think your past determines your future. You don't think what happened in Ancient Rome has any bearing on what happens to you today. But you think what happened in your last relationship is going to tell you something about what happens in your next relationship.

And when you do that, you're making two mistakes. You're conflating the past and your story about the past. You think your story about the past is a real thing, that it is the past. But your story about the past is just current thoughts in your mind. Really stop and think about that. What you think happened in the past, your story about the past, your past, it is all made up of thoughts in your mind right now; thoughts you are thinking right now, which may or may not be the same ones as the thought you were thinking when it happened and which may have little to no basis in what actually happened.

Your thoughts you had in the past were not any more real than your current thoughts and the past only exists in your current thoughts anyway. So your past only impacts you – really think about this – your past only can impact you in so far as you think thoughts now about it and believe those thoughts and act in accordance with those thoughts. If you woke up with amnesia tomorrow and you had no thoughts about the past, your past would not affect you.

So the first big mistake is conflating your story about the past with the past. And the second mistake is thinking that the past is the best predictor of the future. But as I said, that's only true if you keep the same thoughts. Whatever thoughts you have that led to certain results in your past, you're right. If you don't change those thoughts, you will get the same results.

But it's not that the past predicts the future because the results somehow predict each other. It's the thoughts. If you change your thoughts, there's literally no reason that you would get the same result. The past doesn't predict the future because past results somehow control current results or

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future results. The past only predicts the future if you keep thinking the same thoughts you had in the past, then you'll get the same results now.

Your thoughts caused your feelings and actions and results in the past, you just didn't know it, but it was still true. Your past thoughts created your past results. If you change those thoughts, you'll get different results. One of the things I think is funny and I always tell my clients is that generally we have it backwards. We think that we are doomed to be exactly the way we are and repeat our, quote en quote, mistakes. We think our past determines our future, but we expect other people to completely change.

Like, oh when I married him, he was like this but I figured I would change that, but I can't change. It's exactly the opposite. You are so much better served going through life assuming that other people are not going to change. I mean, they can if they want to, if they change their thoughts, but you can't control that. And most of the time, if they're not interested in thought work, they're not going to, right.

So it's totally the opposite. If you go through life believing that other people are going to keep being who they are and who they've shown you they are, but you can become whoever you want, that's such a more powerful kind of belief system to be operating with.

Alright, so how does all this come back around to potential? I promise, they are connected. Our potential is so vast compared to what we think it is because we base it on the past. Either we base it on some weird perfectionistic idea, which still isn't even the best we could do because it's kind of limited by our current thinking and we don't believe we can get there, or we just base it on our past. So we think, well I've never done X, Y, Z before so I can't do it in the future.

If you'd asked me five years ago what my potential was to run a million-dollar business, I would have said zero – like literally zero. I could not have

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imagined how that would happen. I had no belief or even desire to be an entrepreneur. I did not think I could do that, did not think I would ever make much money, did not think that I wanted to be in charge of a business or a team. I would have just said zero because I'd never done anything like it.

And now, if you ask me, my answer is like, "Oh a million, that's nothing. We're going bigger than that." If you'd asked me five years ago if I could love my body and feel amazing in it without losing weight, even if I gained weight, I would have laughed in your face, but now I do. I couldn't even imagine that potential.

At that point, the potential I imagined was to somehow miraculously transform into somebody who had a toned size two body and possibly was six inches taller, right. That was the perfectionistic living up to my potential, which was totally impossible and not actually what was going to blow my mind or transform my life and I couldn't even see what that potential was for what was really going to happen to me.

If you'd asked me five years ago if I could have close and enjoyable relationships with my family and not feel any drama over those relationships, I probably would have scowled at you and been like, "Yeah, if they completely change." But here I am today, that's what I have and they haven't changed at all. I'm the one who changed. My thoughts changed.

But I couldn't even imagine that was possible because I believed all of my stories. And in the world where I believed all those stories, that was impossible. So all these things seemed impossible to me because I believed my stories about my past. I believed my stories were true and that my past would continue and that meant I had no idea what my true potential was.

I had these fake pretend perfectionistic potential dreams that were impossible like be a perfect person and never be sad and never say

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anything mean and always do all the work in the entire world and run three marathons, just like total nonsense. Not that running three marathons is nonsense; some people do that. I am not doing that. I don't actually want to do that. It was this sort of use of my potential as just a perfectionistic ideal with which to beat myself up for not meeting it, right.

And meanwhile, I had no idea what my real potential was because I was completely believing my stories from the past. I was not living up to my potential and I'm so glad because my potential turned out to be so much weirder and more exciting and more unexpected than I could have predicted. And I'm not living up to my potential now and I'm fucking thrilled about that because that means there's so much potential still left for me. There's so many ways I'm going to grow and expand in the future.

I don't even see them yet. I don't know what they are. I know what my, like, short and intermediate term goals are, but I don't even know where I'm going to be in five or ten years and that's amazing. I know that my past doesn't determine my future. I know that if I think new thoughts, I will get new results, but I can't even foresee what my potential is going to be.

There is no limit on my potential except for the limit that I create with my own mind. The same is true for you. So the next time your brain says to you, you're not living up to your potential, I want you to look it dead in the eye, metaphorically speaking, and say, "No kidding, and isn't that great? I can't wait to find out what potential I have ahead of me that I don't even know about right now."

Alright, my chickens, enjoy your week. Lean into your potential, but remember, you're never living up to your potential and that is a beautiful thing.

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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.