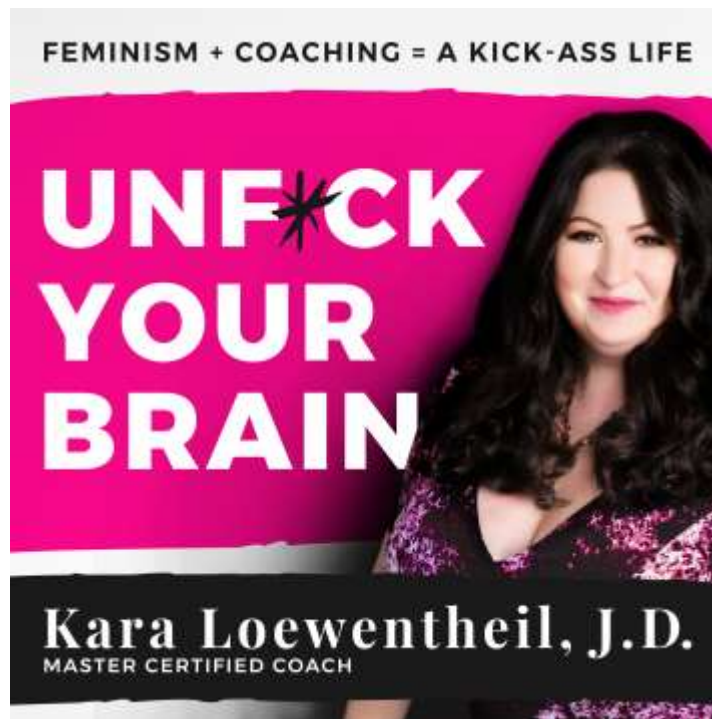


UFYB 42: Listener Q & A Vol. 1



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

Hello my chickadees, I know usually I call you chickens. I hope you don't mind being called a chickadee. I understand technically they're very different birds but I just kind of feel like chickadee should be a diminutive of chicken. You know, like they just sound like they should go together. And I feel like if Shakespeare can make up his own language rules, we can too.

So today I'm calling you chickadees. Anyway, I'm doing a lot of things different today. So that's a different introduction, and I'm also going to do a different podcast episode. So I get a lot of emails and Facebook and Instagram messages from you guys, which I love to hear from you but I cannot respond to them all directly because the volume is just too much. And especially when they are kind of requests for individual coaching or answers, which of course I can't provide over Instagram.

So what I am going to do is read some of them and answer them live on the podcast. I think that's the second best thing to be able to coach and answer you directly. And in fact, it's actually better for everyone else because everyone will learn.

So I've chosen questions that I think all of you will learn from. The specifics of your situation may not match but the underlying coaching question I've selected because I think it's an important one that a lot of people struggle with. Of course, I'm not going to use anyone's name. I'm just going to describe each situation in general terms and answer the question.

Okay, and I've cut out all the fluff. So if one of these was yours and you wrote me a really nice intro paragraph about how much the podcast has

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changed your life and helped you, don't worry, I read it, I appreciated it, I'm just not going to repeat them. I'm just going to kind of cut to the content.

Okay, so first question. "Hi Kara, my ex broke up with me a few years ago. We have a young child together. He pays child support and he has our child for 24 hours once a week. He does not want joint - like, half-half custody and he plans to move away from the area in the near future. As a mother, I'm so mad and disappointed that he's not choosing his child. How do I, as a mother, accept his less than part-time parenting? I understand thought work when it comes to me as an individual. I don't understand it when it comes to me being a mom and having a child that it affects. It seems as if every podcast I listen to involves women who are happily married with kids or happily in a relationship, and while I know from listening they weren't always in that place, nobody talks about how to recover from divorce or single parenting. Feel very lost even after almost two years."

Okay, I'm sure that there are podcasts out there about divorce and single parenting. There have got to be. But I think this is a great question. So in essence, this question is, yeah, yeah, I can manage my mind about me, but what about when a third party is being negatively impacted? So here's the problem with that question. It assumes that you know objectively that it's a problem that your ex doesn't want to parent his child half and half or full time.

You're assuming it would be better for your child if your ex was a 50% parent as opposed to 18% or I don't know whatever - I don't know what one seventh of 100% is, whatever that is. 15%? Somewhere between 10 and 20.

Anyway, right? So you think this is a problem and you think that you're describing this objective problem. You're right. The amount of parenting impacts your child, it has some effect on your child, but we actually don't

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know that that's a bad thing. You have no idea whether it's good or bad, right?

Your thoughts about the situation are not objective. Your idea that it's going to negatively impact your child is not an objective truth. That's your opinion. That's your interpretation, that's your thought now about a future that you can't possibly understand or predict.

You have no idea how having 24 hours once a week with his parent or eventually seeing the parent on vacations if your ex moves away is going to impact your child. Here's what we do know. You thinking that you know and being upset on your child's behalf is definitely impacting you right now, and it's impacting your parenting.

So this is what is so you know, kind of ironic/fucked up about how the brain works. Your whole fear is that your child is going to have an absent parent, and that's going to be a problem. So what you do is you ruminate and worry and obsess about this and are angry. And what does that do? That makes you an absent parent emotionally.

When you are fixated on thinking about your ex and what they should be doing differently, you are emotionally absent for your child. So you're so worried that the absence of the other parent is going to be a problem, but you are absent when you are mentally and emotionally fixated on this, right?

So what's going on here and what happens a lot often is that we think if we're concerned about the impact on someone else, that somehow that has nothing to do with our thoughts. But our perception of the impact is still our thoughts. We're still believing we know what should happen, what will happen in the future, and how something is going to impact someone else. And we think we know what would be better. But you have no idea.

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You have no idea what journey the universe has in store for your child, for you, for your ex. And you have no way of knowing what's better or worse. All we can know for sure is that when you are spending your emotional energy fixated on how your ex should behave differently, you are making your own situation worse and you're not showing up for your kid, right?

So any time that you find yourself saying, "Okay, yeah, but how can I manage my mind about these negative impacts on this third party?" it's still about you and your thoughts. You don't know that other person's journey. You don't know their path, right?

Now, I'm not saying a lot of the times this is where people get confused between emotional resistance and like, political resistance, right? I don't think that we should keep children across the border in cages. I take political action about that. I donate, I would go to a protest, right? So much honking, you guys, the taxi drivers are mad about this teaching. Life in New York.

Okay, I politically resist that, but I don't emotionally resist it. I don't spend a lot of time being - thinking about how it shouldn't be the case, right? Because that emotional resistance just drains me. So do you want to maybe have a conversation with your ex about this? Sure. Do you want to take action to make sure that your child can get as much time with their father as you can manage? Sure. Take some action if you think it would be good for your child to have more time with their father within your sphere of control.

But your ex is the way he is, right? And you resisting that and believing you know it's a problem is what's causing your suffering. His custody share does not cause your suffering, and it doesn't cause your child suffering. Your child's feelings are also caused by their thoughts.

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So what do you want to model for them? That we can enjoy the time we have with the people we love and that we can learn how to manage our mind? Or do you want to teach them that other people's actions control our lives and that we should resist and resent them and fixate on them? Right? I think that's an easy choice.

Okay, next question. "Hi Kara, recently I heard you say something along the lines of what if no one's the bad guy. This really struck me because I am always looking to figure out who's to blame, including with my ex-boyfriend. How do I get around truly believing that he was the bad guy? I have to see him frequently because we work in the same place and I immediately feel such rage, anxiety, sadness, and distraction, and I get paralyzed and I just go down the rabbit hole. How do I stop the madness?"

So I love this question because I think that the desire for there to be a bad guy is super interesting. And here's why I think we want someone else to be the bad guy. I think we want someone else to be the bad guy so that we don't have to be the bad guy.

Because we think someone's to blame. Like, this is the logic chain in your brain does. I feel bad, I feel anxious, I feel sad, whatever, I feel angry, I don't like this feeling, this feels bad, don't like this, okay, why do I feel this way? Someone needs to be to blame because this feeling is bad, so someone needs to be to blame. Either it's me or it's someone else. I don't want to believe it's me because then I would feel shame. So I'm going to believe it's someone else.

I think that's like, the logic chain our brain goes through. And the problem is that it's starting with the whole premise that the negative feeling is a problem, right? But the negative feeling is not a problem. It's harmless.

So you feel angry or anxious or sad, it's just a physical sensation. You're not like, "Oh my god, I have a headache. Who is the bad guy to blame for

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this? This is intolerable." Right? You're just like, "Oh, my head hurts, I might need to drink some water, I might need to take an Advil, I might need to just like, live with this until it passes." It's not a crisis.

But with a negative emotion, because we don't know how to process them or cope with them and we make them mean so much, then we start to spin out and then we think someone has to be to blame. And we don't want it to be us because then we'd feel shame and humans hate feeling shame.

So instead of feeling ashamed of ourselves, we get angry at someone else. And that's a terrible kind of choice to have. Like, those are not good choices. To be angry at someone else or to be ashamed at yourself. Both of those involve a judgment and resistance that creates so much emotional suffering for you.

So the way out of that dilemma, the way out of the prisoner's dilemma of shame or anger is that no one has to be the blame because nothing has gone wrong. Some people took some actions, said some words, you have some feelings because you have some thoughts. That's all, right?

It really takes everything down such a notch because your ex-boyfriend did not hurt you and you did not hurt him. You each had thoughts that created feelings, right? And if you take responsibility for your own feelings, if you are willing to have your feelings and you take responsibility for examining and changing the thoughts behind them, at least examining them, changing them if you want to, if necessary, you take emotional ownership of your experience, then no one has to be the bad guy. You don't have to be mad at him, and you don't have to be mad at yourself.

So all this rage, anxiety, sadness, that stuff you have to learn how to allow the feeling and how to unpack it. See what the thoughts are causing it. And then take responsibility for them so that nobody has to be the bad guy.

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Okay, next question. "Hi Kara, I was married to a nice guy for many years. We were together for a total of 25 years. Early in our marriage, he told me that he wasn't sexually attracted to me and said he used porn to get excited. Eventually I figured out that he had erectile dysfunction. He never would admit it and he allowed me to believe that I was the problem, that his lack of attraction for me was why we didn't have sex. I was overweight and had poor self-esteem. Eventually he admitted that he knew that he had this condition but that he didn't tell me because he thought I wouldn't marry him. By the end of our marriage, we were more like roommates and my husband consented to have an open marriage and I had a few affairs."

Okay, although technically, as far as I'm concerned, if everybody's aware and consenting, it's not an affair. Okay, so had sex with some other people. "Eventually we got divorced, it was all very amicable. Fast forward a few years, I'm not remarried and I have been completely transparent about my past and how hard I've worked to be proud of the person I've become. My partner values fidelity very highly, and recently on a bad day, he used my past as a weapon against me and projected on me that I would step out on him because I have a history of that behavior. He apologized later and I thanked him for that and told him I was glad he was honest about what he was thinking and feeling. But now I'm holding a grudge and withholding sex. He has no idea how it is to be in a marriage where your partner emotionally and physically abandons you. I know my behavior isn't appropriate and two wrongs don't make a right, but I'm tired of apologizing and being judged for something in the rearview mirror. I'd love your perspective on this. While my case has some specifics, I'd imagine there's other strong women who can relate to their past being used against them."

Okay, got a couple things going on here. Number one, you need to take responsibility for it and forgive yourself for whatever you did in your marriage, right? So you say I know my behavior was inappropriate, two wrongs don't make a right. I think you feel ashamed of having these affairs. Again, it's not totally clear to me from this question whether your - if your husband knew that you were having sex with other people and agreed to it

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then I don't know why you're calling it an affair and judging it as negative, but maybe you had affairs then told him, I don't know exactly what happened.

But I can tell that you say that you know your behavior's inappropriate, that it was wrong, so you feel shame about it. And that's why you're so reactive about this issue is because you feel ashamed, it's like a very tender spot and someone's pushing on it. So you have to forgive yourself, right? You have to understand that your thoughts caused your feelings caused your actions in the past, and whatever you did was meant to happen that way. And the reason we know it was meant to happen that way was it did. It couldn't have happened any other way, right?

And this is a concept that people have a lot of trouble with, especially kind of - I used to have a lot of trouble with it because I thought it meant like, some divine being I didn't believe in was like, organizing it. And some people do believe that. I think that brings them a lot of comfort.

When I say it was meant to happen the way it did, it had to happen that way, what I mean is that if whatever happens is a result of all the thoughts and feelings that each of us are having in any given circumstance, all those factors coalesce to create what happens, wherever we were and the other person was and the weather was like and the house was like, whatever, wherever we all were in that moment could only have produced that result.

So it couldn't have been any different. Because at the time it happened in the past, you were who you were and your ex-husband was who he was, and the people you slept with was who they were, and the weather was what it was and the house you were in was what it was, and the political climate was what it was. The whole world was as it was and so the next moment was determined.

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And so it couldn't have happened any other way. Now, whether or not that resonates with you, you do need to find a way to forgive yourself, to change your thoughts about your past behavior so that you won't have shame about it. Because your shame is what's making you so reactive about it, okay? So that's one problem.

You also need to forgive your ex-husband because you're blaming him for your feelings. You think that what he did was wrong and that he caused your pain and suffering. Other people don't cause our pain and suffering. Our thoughts do. So you need to forgive yourself and you need to forgive your ex-husband because you have a whole story about how he ruined this period, he allowed you to believe you were the problem, as if he controls your brain, that he's to blame for you being the weight you were and having poor self-esteem.

That's not his fault. Nobody - see the last question. Nobody has to be to blame. So you need to forgive yourself, you need to forgive your ex-husband, and I don't mean forgive because he did something wrong. I mean you need to see that he didn't cause your feelings in the past, and he certainly doesn't cause them now. And you need to take emotional responsibility now in your current relationship, right?

You're withholding sex and holding a grudge because you think that your partner hurt your feelings and you think he's shaming you. But he's not doing either of those things. Your thoughts are. He said something, he apologized. The reason you can't get over it is that you're worried that it's true.

You're worried that he's right, that you did something shameful, and so you're angry and you feel ashamed and you're shutting down. So you have to take responsibility for your own thoughts and feelings, for your own behavior and not in a moralistic, judging, punitive sense. You just need to realize that whatever your current partner said to you did not cause your feelings. He can't use your past as a weapon against you, right?

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You're totally in this language where other people can hurt you and injure you and cause your feelings. And as long as you tell yourself that story, this is what you'll end up doing. You'll end up being passive aggressive and trying to punish and acting in ways that you don't like because you're trying to control and manipulate other people, and you're blaming them.

So you need to realize that you're the only one who can use your past as a weapon against yourself because you're the only one who can cause your feelings with your own thoughts. That's your work. That's the work for you to do. It has nothing to do with being a strong woman who's past is being used against them. I know that's what you think the problem is, but no one can use your past against you except for you because no one else can cause your thoughts or feelings.

Okay, next question. "My spouse behaves like a child, throwing tantrums and calling me names. I can eventually control how I think and feel, but they're forcing me to expend energy because of their - through their willful actions, they're affecting me and depleting me of my energy, which I have to use to put my thoughts and feelings in check. I believe there needs to be accountability from these people that cause these situations by their decisions and inability to control themselves. Do you agree? I just find that I cannot be accountable for everyone else but they can indeed impact me negatively. They shouldn't be let off the hook just because I have responsibility for my thoughts and feelings."

I love all of you but so many of you write me emails where you're like, "Hi, I know you teach that other people aren't responsible for my thoughts and feelings but what about in this situation?" So, I totally understand why this person asked this question. This is how we're taught that other people have to be accountable for causing our feelings.

No, I don't agree. And I don't agree that they are forcing you to expend energy because of their actions. They are not affecting you, they are not depleting you. It's your thoughts that are doing all of that. Now, listen, this is

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a whole other topic I could do a podcast on. The very short version of having a boundary is there are certain kinds of behavior that you may not want to be around. Not because they cause your feelings, because you are in charge of your feelings. Just because they're not the kind of thing you enjoy experiencing.

And so you might set a boundary that if your spouse calls you a name, that you are going to leave the room and not come back until they've calmed down. Or you're going to hang up the phone, or whatever it is. You can set boundaries around real emotional or physical violations, which are a limited set of things. But you set those boundaries out of love for yourself. It's not about you're wrong, you're responsible, you caused my feelings, and I have to punish you and teach you to behave differently.

None of that shit works. You can set a boundary just to say out of love for myself, I don't let people yell at me. I'm a grownup, I think we can resolve all conflicts without yelling, I don't participate in yelling conversations. So if you yell at me, I'm going to leave the room. You're not trying to control them or teach them anything. You're just removing yourself out of love for yourself, that you don't want to be around yelling without any emotional drama.

That's why it's not true to say they are affecting you and depleting you of your energy. Because you could actually even have a rule that you will physically remove yourself if someone yells at you and you could feel totally calm and chill about it. What is depleting your energy is all of your thoughts and feelings and resistance.

So this is what's so ironic, right? What good would it do you for them to "accept accountability?" It actually wouldn't solve your problem at all. Your problem is that you are exhausted because you have all these thoughts that your spouse is an asshole and shouldn't behave the way they're behaving, right? That's what is exhausting. Your resistance to your

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spouse's behavior, all your thoughts that they shouldn't be that way, and it's a problem and they need to change. That's what is tiring.

If they throw a tantrum, using your words, and then afterwards they "take accountability," it doesn't solve your problem at all. During the "tantrum," you're still going to have all those negative thoughts and feelings and you're going to feel depleted. For them to then say some words afterwards, it doesn't change it at all.

So this is like a red herring. It's like an illusion or a mirage. This idea that if other people took accountability, we would feel different. You don't feel different. Haven't you ever noticed or experienced you're mad at someone and then they apologize and you're still mad at them? You know why? Because they don't control your feelings. They don't cause your thoughts and feelings, so their apology really doesn't matter because you're still having the same thoughts and feelings and so you still feel mad.

So I 100% disagree that other people are accountable for your thoughts and feelings. And you can totally keep that belief if you want, but I just want you to see what it's creating in your life. A lot of frustration and a lot of resistance, and a lot of anger and feeling depleted.

And meanwhile, I don't feel depleted because I don't feel that other people owe me a certain kind of behavior or have to be "accountable" for their actions and their behavior, especially since no one has any idea what that really means.

So if your spouse is calling you names that are offensive to you, there's no objective offensive, but if they're offensive to you or they're throwing things at you or whatever, I totally recommend having a boundary out of love for yourself, which is like, I'm going to remove myself from this situation when you do that thing just because I don't want to be around it, to protect myself. Not protect because they can like, harm you emotionally, but just I

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don't find it pleasant to be around, you know, somebody who's screaming at me or throwing things as risk of physical injury that I don't really want to run, so I'm going to remove myself.

That's not the same as resisting that they are that way and wanting them to take accountability and believing that they affect you, they deplete you of your energy. And here's the other mistake that's embedded in this. You think, "Oh, well they're responsible because now I have to use my energy to manage my mind."

I got news for you. If your spouse stopped throwing tantrums, you'd find something else you had to manage your mind about. Being a human means you have to manage your mind. That requires some energy no matter what. It's not caused by other people, and the truth is if you just actually spent the energy managing your mind, which you're definitely not doing in this situation, you would use some energy in a short period of time to figure it out and then you would just feel chill.

But instead, you're half managing your mind on an ongoing basis, which is draining and you never really make much progress because you're still believing that they need to change, that they're the problem.

Okay, I'm going to do two more kind of quick questions. One is I got a message from someone saying, "Could you do a podcast about the ego and consciousness? How do we know when a thought comes from ego consciousness or where else it might come from?"

So my answer to this is it doesn't matter. I mean, I don't know where else it would come from other than your conscious or your subconscious. There's only two places your thoughts can come from. I just think your thoughts come from your brain. I don't think thinking about the ego versus the super ego or the id is all that useful. You know, the old Freudian version.

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You know, this person might have meant when a thought comes from ego meaning is it about our own beliefs about ourselves or our own self-esteem, and most of our thoughts are. So I just don't think this is a really helpful enquiry at all. Doesn't matter where your thoughts come from. It doesn't matter if they're true. The question is are they helpful, and there's a whole podcast about that.

It is called "How to Choose New Thoughts," it's episode Unf*ck Your Brain, 38. So in that podcast, I go in depth into how to decide which thoughts to think or believe and the short version is what's helpful. Doesn't really matter what's true or where it came from.

And the kind of like, focusing on where it came from, that's like saying like, "Oh, I have a potato and something poisonous but like, I'll make the decision about which to eat based on where it came from." Don't do it based on that. Do it based on which one's going to kill you.

Okay, last question. I just think this one is super interesting and I could totally do a whole podcast about this. "I saw you post in your Instagram story about how we all make our own decisions about how much to kind of conform to patriarchal norms around our gender presentation or feminine appearance. I notice you wear your hair straight even though it's curly. I struggle with this because," - I actually got multiple messages about this by the way, so this is like, a thing a lot of people are dealing with and I just picked one.

"I notice you wear your hair straight even though it's curly, and I really struggle with this because I also have curly hair and I've been told that it looks more professional to have it straightened and I kind of think that's bullshit but I do need to look professional and that prejudice exists. So how do you handle that?"

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I think this is a great question and again, like, I could do a whole podcast about this. My short answer is I think that we all have to decide, right? We are all complicit in oppressive power structures to some extent, and we all have to figure out where we're going to kind of slot ourselves on the spectrum. It's not even a spectrum. I feel like it's like, intersecting spectrums of like, what you like, even though your aesthetics are also shaped by society and what feels good to you, and what your professional requirements may be.

But I also think that a lot of this has to do with your thoughts, not surprisingly, and how those show up in your confidence, right? So just imagine this. Imagine being a woman with curly hair who wants to wear it curly but thinks the whole day about how everyone else thinks she isn't professional because it's curly. And so her mind is totally consumed with worrying about what other people think about her hair.

How does she show up versus someone's who's like, fuck it, that's so stupid, no one thinks that, even if they say it they're so dumb, it's not worth worrying about, I'm going to show up, kick-ass at my job and no one is going to give my hair a second thought when they see how good I am at my job?

Right? Those two people show up totally differently. So I'm not saying that confidence gets you a full pass out of gender presentation social pressures, and obviously, curly versus straight hair is a pretty small issue compared to a lot of the oppressive gender presentation norms that people who are gender queer or trans or somewhere else on the gender spectrum struggle with.

So I'm not saying they're the same thing. Just answering this question that was sent to me. But I do think that especially when we're talking about sort of a professional environment or someplace your physical safety is not at risk that the way that you mentally decide to think about it is going to really impact how you show up.

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So we spend all this time worrying about like, well, should it be curly or should it be straight or what about in court or what about at this meeting as opposed to like, how am I going to be a kick ass lawyer, doctor, architect, whatever, is so good that no one is going to look at my hair and I can wear it however I want.

I mean, it's a rule for sure of life that the more you are focused on what other people are thinking about you, the less you are able to show up the way you want to show up, right? And be good at your job and be the kind of person you want to be and just feel confident in your own skin.

So wherever you decide - I think it's like, two steps. Number one, don't shame yourself. Everybody's got to pick their own line. For me right now at least, my line is like, no alterations to my physical structure. Like, I wouldn't get plastic surgery to conform to current gender norms. I wouldn't - like I thought about getting braces recently because I'm doing all of this video now and I never had braces growing up so my teeth are not - they don't look like a movie star's teeth. And I decided not to because it's like, moving around the bones of my face for a non-medical reason.

Again, this is my personal decision. This is not a criticism of anyone who gets braces or gets plastic surgery or whatever else. I think these decisions are totally personal because the politics are so complicated and because we are all complicit in different ways and we all just have to decide what level we're willing to work with.

That's mine. Yours might be different. But whatever it is, don't shame yourself about it. Using it as a weapon against yourself to criticize yourself for not being feminist enough or not being brave enough or not being strong enough is totally useless, totally counterproductive. So don't shame yourself about it.

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Think about it. Don't shame yourself. But also, at the same time, don't just take for granted when your brain's like, oh well, even though I hate straightening my hair, I have to spend three hours a day doing it otherwise no one will think I'm professional. Don't take your own anxieties and fears, especially if you are like, a generally mainstream presenting person whose physical safety's not at risk. Like, don't take those thoughts and fears about like, how other people will judge you in your office or whatever or what your mom will say because she always told you that your hair looked better straight.

Like, don't let that determine your decision either. It's like, do the thought work and get clear about what you really want to do. You know, what feels good to you when you're not coming from a place of trying to control what other people think about you and make the decision that way rather than based on what other people tell you you should do.

Okay, that's a complicated topic so there may be more on that. I'm sure I'm going to hear from you guys about that one. Alright, that was fun. I'm happy to do more of these if you guys like them. So just drop me a line, info@redesignyourmind.com or you can just send me a DM on Instagram or on Facebook and let me know if you liked doing these. If you liked this episode, if you have questions you'd want me to answer, and I'm happy to do these kind of periodically if you like it. Alright chickadees, talk to you soon.

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.