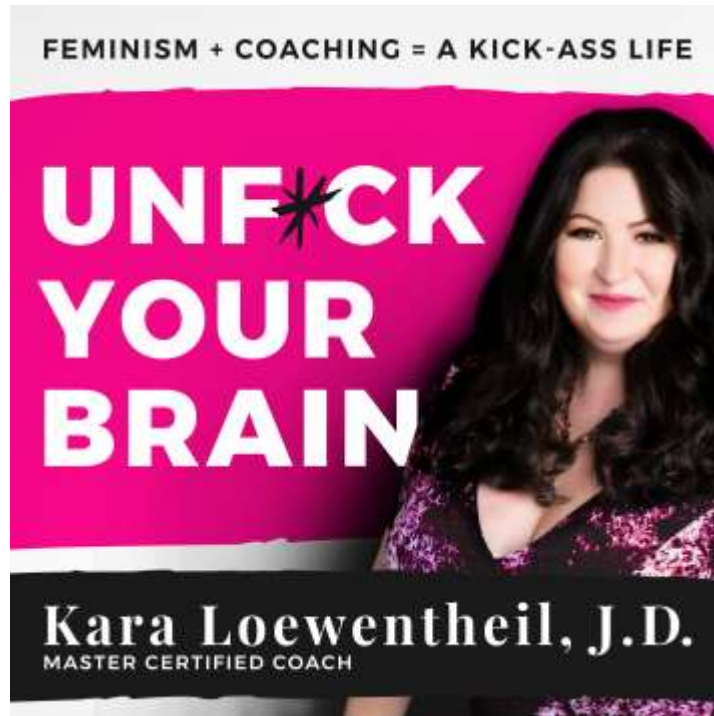


UFYB 43: Why Restriction Doesn't Work



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, chickens. Can you believe that summer is basically over? I do not know where the time went. I'm very confused. I would like a do-over. Today is like, the total podcast day because I'm recording this episode, I'm also recording another episode to get ahead because I'm going on vacation, and then I just recorded an interview for this podcast called *51 First Dates*, which was super fun.

I actually was not familiar with the podcast before they reached out to me, but once I heard from them, I was super excited about it and the hosts are named Kimmy and Liza, and it's just - we had so much fun jamming about dating and insecurity and confidence, and by the time this podcast comes out, that episode will already be out on their podcast. So you can go check out - listen to this episode first, obviously, then go check out *51 First Dates* is the name of the podcast. Can hear all the honking, obviously all the taxis agree with me. Go check it out and my episode will be the episode that came out on August 22nd.

Alright, so although today has been a little bit nuts, one thing I really like about August in general in New York is how empty it is because everyone is out of town, and even the tourists die down a bit. And so yesterday I actually was walking through Soho, which normally I would not do because it's usually just mobbed with tourists, but things are kind of chill so I met a friend for lunch and then I was on my way to my co-working space, The Wing, which is an all-female co-working space and social club that I adore.

That was not a promotion. I pay for my membership. I just like it there. Anyway, point is, I was walking over there and I passed a store that had these beautiful handbags in the window, and I looked up and I saw that it was a Mulberry store. So if you haven't heard of Mulberry, they're a very

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upscale handbag brand, and I had looked them up when I was writing this podcast because I actually didn't know. The company has been around since the 70s, that's the part I didn't know because I remembered that in the like, early kind of 2000s, it seemed like they came out of nowhere.

So the story is apparently in 2007 they hired a new designer who took them from being like a British briefcase maker kind of into a luxury handbag company. Anyway, here's why I'm telling you this. This is not Wikipedia. I was walking around the Mulberry store today and I was really remembering around, I guess 2007, I would say 2008, 2009, I was back in New York, I finished my clerkship in New Orleans, and I remembered that Mulberry bags hit the US fashion scene and that they were the popular new accessory.

And they were also incredibly expensive, and I could not afford one at the time. Or you know, depending - that could mean a lot of different things. I technically had the money to buy one but I also knew that based on my salary at the time, I was a litigation fellow at a non-profit, I was not making very much, and it did not make any kind of sense to buy a \$1000 handbag.

And let's like, put aside, I mean, we could have a conversation about whether it ever makes sense to buy a \$1000 handbag, but we're operating within the world of capitalist consumption here and honestly, for the purpose of this podcast, it really doesn't matter because you're going to see that what I'm going to talk about is a mental response that you can have to a \$1000 handbag or a \$20 handbag, right? It can be at Mulberry, it can be at Target. It doesn't matter.

So it's 2008, 2009, these handbags are out, I really, really want one, I have desire created by my thoughts, which are mostly about my own insecurity, and the way that the bag is like a status symbol and shows that you're fashionable. And then also all these thoughts about how it's too expensive and I can't afford it.

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So I remember telling myself that I shouldn't buy one, I couldn't have it. And I remember feeling this great desire for the bag, and then like, this shame about having the desire, and then this guilt about even thinking about purchasing one, and this guilt about how I spent my money, and then the rebellion against that guilt, the rebellion against that shame, the rebellion against that restriction. I had a lot of torturous feelings over a handbag.

Fast forward to today, I had a completely different experience. I had full permission from myself to buy one of the bags if I wanted to, and it wouldn't have made a difference to my budget, it would have been fine if I wanted to just buy it. But you know what? I didn't want one. And it's not because I no longer like the style, the handbags are still gorgeous, I still use bags, I still have to carry things around and women don't have enough pockets, and that's a whole other patriarchal problem we could talk about.

But I didn't have that like, intense desire and restriction and rebellion and shame and guilt, I didn't have all of that mess in my mind. So the bags just weren't charged in the same way. And what's changed of course is not the bag, it's my mindset. So there are a couple of aspects to my thoughts that have changed. One is that I know I actually love myself, I have authentic inner confidence. So I spend way less than I used to on bags or shoes or clothes because I no longer think of them as external signals of my value or my worth or my success.

I no longer buy things to try and make other people, really to try and make myself think a certain way about me. We can have a whole podcast episode about that too. But what I really want to focus on today is the way that my thoughts had changed from restriction to permission. And this is why it doesn't matter whether you would ever even look at a \$1000 handbag. It can be a \$20 handbag and it could be a \$20,000 handbag. It doesn't matter what the thing is or how much it is. What matters are your thoughts about it.

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So when I believed I should not buy it, with the should, I was operating from a place of restriction. I was telling myself that I could not, or should not and so I was placing a mental restriction on myself. And you know what the human reaction to restriction is? It is rebellion. And I see this most often when it comes to food and money. So many of us, especially women believe that controlling out eating, controlling our bodies, controlling our spending are moral issues.

We wouldn't say we think they're moral, like if I asked you, do you think it's moral, you wouldn't say yes, but it is to you because when you do it well, you feel good about yourself, and when you do it poorly, you feel guilt and shame. And that means that is a moral status in your brain.

When we try to restrict ourselves, we create a natural rebellion. We become the taskmaster and the daydreaming pupil. We become the mean accountant and the over-spender. We become the parent pushing vegetables and the toddler who wants cake. We immediately split ourselves into two roles. The restrictor and the restricted.

And doing that creates feeling of restriction, rebellion, and resistance. So if you've ever wondered why you find it so difficult to do things that you know are good for you, or things you know you should do, or sometimes even things that you kind of think you want to do but for some reason you can't do them, this is why. The minute that you put restriction on it, the minute you tell yourself that you should or shouldn't do something, that you can't have it, the minute you make your self-acceptance hinge on it or tell yourself you're not allowed, you've transformed yourself into both the bully and the victim.

And from that space, it's impossible to access your actual desires or priorities or values or choices or wisdom. As soon as you place restrictions on your eating from a place of should or have to, you will naturally want to rebel and eat only that restricted food. No matter whether you really love it or not, right? And it creates that whole charge of the forbidden.

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As soon as you place restrictions on your spending from a place of should or have to, you will create the desire to spend money on shit you don't even want or need just to show your restricting self it isn't the boss, just to push back against that restriction. Restriction creates rebellion.

So if restriction creates rebellion, what is the answer to this conundrum? The answer can't be that you just eat foods that make you feel ill all the time and you buy \$1000 handbags instead of paying your rent. That's not the solution. I mean, that is a solution, it's not what I recommend.

The opposite of restriction, the solution to restriction is allowance. Restriction creates rebellion, but allowance creates the space for choice. The key to escaping the mental prison of restriction and the key to curbing the impulsive acting out of rebellion is to recognize that you are always, always making a choice.

You always have the power to choose what you want to eat, where you want to spend your money, and how you want to spend your time. There are very few things you will actually be compelled to do in your life on pain of death. Really, there are people who don't speak to their families, there are people who would never eat a vegetable, there are people who don't pay their taxes, there are even people who abandon their children. Those are all choices that are open to you.

Now, you may not like the consequences of those actions, maybe you don't want to be the kind of person who abandons their children. Maybe you don't want your body to be nutrient starved, maybe you don't want to go to jail for not paying your taxes. But those are still choices about which consequences you'd rather experience. If you tell yourself you can't or shouldn't do something, you create the mental restriction that produces rebellion.

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But if you take ownership of your own choices and your agency in making the decision, if you mentally allow the decision as a possibility and recognize that you could do it if you wanted, you will feel entirely differently and that's when you'll be able to make it a choice. When you are telling yourself that you should not eat carbs because they're going to kill you and make you fat, all you will think about is eating carbs. Let me be really clear, I'm not saying carbs make you fat and kill you. I'm saying that's the thought you might have.

If you do the mental work to truly internalize that whether or not you eat carbs is totally unrelated to your moral worth or your lifespan, you will be able to choose whether you want to eat them or not. This is just how the human brain is. Like, I didn't invent it. I didn't make the brain this way, but this is how it is. It's like, I'll have clients come to me and say, well I'm lactose intolerant and eating dairy makes me feel awful but I can't stop.

The reason they can't stop is they're telling themselves they shouldn't eat it and they can't have it. That immediately creates restriction, and it puts a moral value on whether they eat it or not, and that creates rebellion. So they're trying to restrict it mentally to change the behavior, but it's backfired.

When they do the work to make sure that whether or not they eat lactose is just a choice with predictable consequences, when they remove the should, they then can truly choose whether or not to eat it and whether or not to experience those consequences. And the same is true for spending or anything else you're restricting.

My problem back in 2008 wasn't that I couldn't afford the bag. My problem was that I had the thought that I couldn't afford the bag and that I shouldn't buy it, that I couldn't have it. I was not making a conscious empowered choice that I would rather spend my money elsewhere. I was telling myself that I did not have enough and I was not allowed to buy it, and that immediately made me want it more.

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In the end, while I didn't buy this particular bag, I definitely spent a lot of money on other things I didn't really need and I couldn't even be truly sure I wanted. I mean, you speak to people often who - women who have gone through intuitive eating processes and have learned to allow food. What they tell you is that they don't eat chocolate cake all the time because they don't actually want it nearly as often when they're not telling themselves that they can't have it.

There are places I spend more money now that I make more money like travel, you know, I'm a plus sized woman and now when I travel I will often travel first class, it's more comfortable. Like, I'll spend more money on that. But I spend way less money on things like shoes or bags or kind of like, status symbol consumption that I don't really need. I spend way less money now than I did when I had way less money because my mindset has changed.

And you will hear this from other people who start making more money and suddenly find actually, they often spend less. They have less desire to shop for random things, they have less desire to spend money in some of the ways they used to because they are no longer thinking restrictive thoughts.

That's what's so insidious about restriction is it makes you think you want things that you may not even want or care about. Just telling yourself you can't have it will create the rebellious desire to get it at any cost whether you actually want it or not.

Allowance means creating the space for you to really exercise your agency and make a choice. And be careful because this space is entirely internal. It happens in your mind. You already have this agency. You create the space by recognizing that. You create the space by recognizing that you are already choosing. You are already making a choice. Just because you don't like the consequences of a choice or you don't like your set of options doesn't mean you aren't making a conscious choice.

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Take responsibility for that choice and you will find that you immediately feel less trapped and less resistant, and correspondingly, less rebellious. So the next time you're feeling rebellious about doing something you think you should do that you don't want to, or you're feeling that desire to do something you don't think you should, or to not do something you think you should, check in with yourself.

Are you creating mental restriction? If so, you're going to create mental rebellion. So instead, change your thoughts. Create allowance that you have the freedom to choose. Remember that you always making a choice and that you have the agency and ownership of that choice. You may not love your set of choices, you may not love the consequences of those choices. That doesn't mean you're not making a choice.

You don't have to be the mean hall monitor or the rebellious student sneaking around. Make your decision consciously, recognize your own agency, and you will make restriction and rebellion a thing of the past.

Alright my chickens, that is it for this week, I will talk to you next week.

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