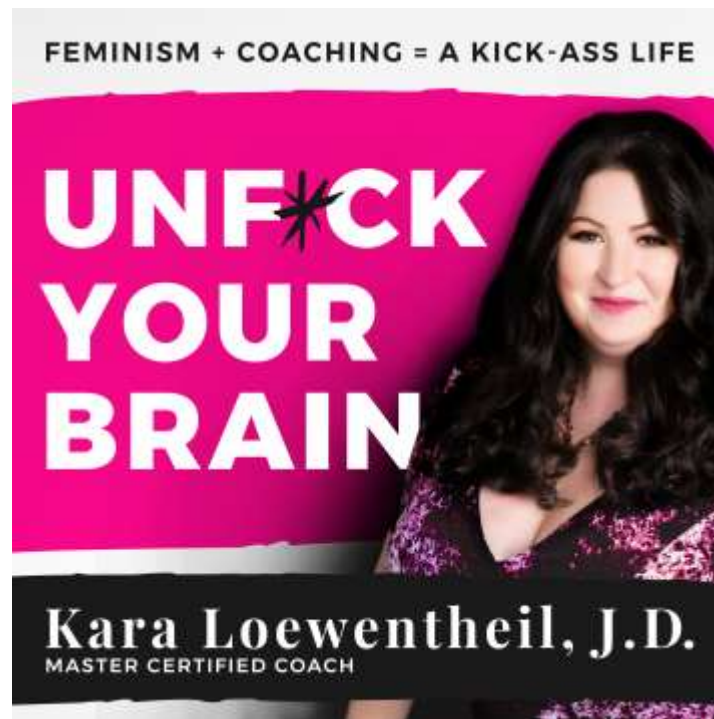


UFYB 47: Boundaries



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. So one of the funny things about having a podcast is that of course people listen to it at different rates. So I often get emails either like, loving or hating episodes that were like, weeks or months ago. And I'm still getting messages about the teaching that I did about drama and "toxic people," and so today I want to teach you about a companion topic that I think will help you all understand how you can reconcile there being no drama or toxic people with what to do in the rare instances where someone else's behavior is truly unacceptable for you, even with a managed mind.

And that topic is boundaries. So before we start, we need to pause so that you can call up in your brain whatever you have learned about boundaries before and just go ahead and delete that file. Like, move it to the mental trashcan. Because if you learned about boundaries from kind of online self-helpy discourse, or your friends, what you learned is probably totally wrong in my opinion, which you can take or leave of course, or at least I think it's very unhelpful.

So first I'm going to teach you what a boundary truly is and how to set one, and then we'll talk a little bit about what a boundary is not and how you know when you're ready to set one and how to do it. So a boundary is a decision you make for yourself about what you will do if a certain behavior happens around you that you don't want to be around.

So for example, some people have a boundary about not having cigarette smoke in their home. Some people have a boundary about not being touched without permission. Most of us have a boundary about not being punched in the face, although possibly not all of us. Some religious people or non-religious people might have a boundary around swearing if it's against their beliefs or they don't like it.

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What you can see from this collection of examples which I chose on purpose is that a boundary has nothing to do with "how bad the behavior is." And that is what most of us think a boundary is. We think a boundary is to keep us safe from other people and that a boundary is appropriate when someone else's behavior gets bad enough. But what behavior is bad is totally subjective and that is not the way to decide when and how to make a boundary.

If you believe that someone else's behavior is bad or wrong, you will want to try to change them. The boundary will be to try and control and change their behavior, and that is not what a boundary is about. A boundary is never to change someone else's behavior. A boundary is for you. It's the action you will take if something happens that you have decided you do not want to be around. And for some people maybe it's smoking or swearing, and for some people maybe it's racist or sexist comments, and for some people maybe it's being punched in the face, right? For some people it's petting their dog when they've said not to. Like, it can be anything.

Because it's not determined by how bad it is. It's determined by what you want to be around, but you can't decide that until you have coached yourself. I mean, of course you can if you want. But I don't advise it. I advise coaching yourself first and here's why: you're not really ready in the way I teach it to make a boundary until two things are true. You are coming from a place of love for yourself and the other person and you do not believe that they are not allowed to do what they are doing and that they need to stop.

And I'm going to explain why this is so important in a minute. It's not because like, it makes you a better person and you get to heaven faster. There's an actual psychological reason that this is important. So number one, you're coming from a place of love for yourself and the other person. Number two, you are 100% ready to enforce the boundary.

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If you set a boundary hoping it will change the other person's behavior so that you don't have to enforce it, that's what - you're like, "I'll just tell them my boundary then they'll change then I won't have to enforce the boundary." You are not setting an effective boundary. Because probably your boundary will not change their behavior, and if you're not ready to really do it, whatever it is you've said you'll do, hang up the phone, leave the room, say something to them, whatever it is, if you aren't ready to really keep it and they keep doing what they're doing, which they probably will, you won't be ready to take the action.

And then what happens is you're trying to control someone else and you're breaking integrity with yourself, and that's going to create a lot of emotional drama. So a boundary has to come out of love. Not hate. It does not come out of rejection of the other person and their behavior, and a belief that they are not allowed to do what they are doing and they should stop it. It comes out of love for yourself and a commitment to what you are or are not willing to be around or experience.

And here's why this is so important: if you believe that the other person's behavior is wrong and shouldn't be happening, you will be emotionally resistant to it. When we are emotionally resistant to things, we want them to change. And what that means is that we are mentally and emotionally focused on the other person and what's wrong with them and trying to change them rather than being mentally and emotionally focused on caring for ourselves and taking whatever action we need to take for ourselves.

When you try to make a boundary from a place of resistance and believing someone else is wrong and bad, it becomes about them in your brain. Then you start thinking, why are they doing this? What does it mean about them that they're doing this? Will they stop doing it? They said they were sorry for doing it last time, are they telling the truth? What does it mean about me that they're doing this bad thing to me? What does it mean about them? How can I get them to stop? Will they stop if I do this? Will they stop if I do

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that? What kind of threat do I need to use? What do I need to threaten to take away or do to them to make them stop?

It becomes completely about them. It produces all of this mental and emotional spin about the other person. None of which you can control. And in a lot of cases, it produces a lot of cognitive dissonance that actually prevents you from setting an effective boundary and taking action. If I love someone and then they do something I don't like and I believe that they're wrong and they shouldn't do that, now I'm confused, right? Now I have to start thinking, well, was I wrong to love them? Should I not love them? Are they not a good enough person to love? Or is there something wrong with me? Am I the one who has the problem? Should I be different? Are they sorry? Are they a bad person? Am I a bad person? Right? I love them so I don't want to think that they're a bad person, and so I get really confused about it in my brain.

And then what happens is I want them to change so I don't have to be wrong about loving them, right? And so then I sort of don't really set a boundary, I try to get them to change, maybe they say they will, maybe they say they won't, I keep giving them "chances" to change, which really means I keep trying to convince them to act differently because I think that how they're acting is wrong and that's confusing for me because I also love them, whether it's like a friend or a parent or a romantic partner or whoever.

So it actually creates all this confusion and spin, and it creates all this cognitive dissonance and resistance because we don't want to believe the person that we love is bad. Like, think about a time that you tried to convince a friend that a romantic partner was bad for them. Was it successful? Not usually. They either defended the person to you or they may have paid lip service to agreeing with you but they usually stayed with the person.

And that's because making it about how the other person is wrong and bad produces all this cognitive dissonance that is paralyzing. And most of us

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have been on both sides of this. We've been the person trying to convince someone that their mom was a narcissist or their boyfriend was gaslighting them or whatever it is and gotten nowhere, and we've been the person who has a romantic partner, let's say, that our friends don't like and we just think, "Yeah, but they don't know about this good part of him. They only hear me complain."

So that dance that we play out with other people we do in our own heads when we make someone else's behavior wrong and we believe that we need to try to change that behavior and that it's wrong and they shouldn't be allowed to do it. If you try to set a boundary from that place, you're just going to end up in spin. You're not going to be able to enforce the boundary because you're doing it to try to change their behavior and your focus is all on them and when it doesn't work, then you're going to try to adjust the boundary or do something else. You're going to be all sucked in mentally and emotionally to making it all about them and trying to change them.

But let's say I make a boundary from a place of unconditional love for myself and for the other person, and I know that they're allowed to do whatever they're doing. I can't stop them, right? I can't control them. They are totally allowed to keep doing it, but I know that it's an absolute boundary for me. Could be anything, right? It could be cheating, it could be yelling, it could be talking about my weight, it could even be violence. I know whenever that thing happens, I immediately know I'm removing myself from the situation.

It has nothing to do with whether they're a good or bad person. It has nothing to do with how many redeeming qualities they have and does that balance out this behavior I don't like and how likely is it that I can make them change it, what does it mean about them, it has nothing to do with any of that. It has nothing to do with whose fault it was. I don't have to spend time thinking was it their fault, was it my fault, maybe I need to change, maybe they need to change. Trying to get them to change or sticking around and trying to change myself so that maybe they'll change.

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I don't have to spend mental energy thinking about any of that because I know that my boundary is if someone does that thing, then I end the interaction or leave the space or whatever it is immediately and that's that. Non-negotiable for me. That gives me so much more power and freedom. This is why taking responsibility for your own thoughts and feelings no matter what someone else is doing is actually the most important thing you can do. It's so interesting to me that people are really upset about this teaching.

I get a lot of emails telling me that gaslighting exists and other people can control your thoughts with their words or actions. So even if you think that that's true, which I don't, I don't think anyone else can control your thoughts or feelings, even if it's true that sometimes they could, isn't teaching someone how to take back power over their own thoughts like, the most empowering thing we could do? I don't understand what that other option is supposed to be. Are we supposed to just say, "Hey, someone else can control your thoughts and feelings so sorry, good luck."? No solution.

It makes no sense to me. Even if that were a real thing that other people could sometimes control your thoughts and feelings, the solution to that is teaching you how to take that control back. Not trying to change them, which you can't do. So I could give you a million examples of what boundaries could be. You might have a mother who won't stop telling you to lose weight. You might have a boss who yells at you. You might have a teenager, your child or stepchild who keeps smoking in the house when you don't want them to or smoking pot when you don't want them to under your roof. Whatever it is.

The teaching is always the same. If you make a boundary that is intended to stop the other person's behavior, that is not a boundary. It's an ultimatum and it usually won't work. The person can tell you're trying to control them and they're going to be resistant to it and they're acting the way they're acting for a reason so they're probably going to keep acting that way. It

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doesn't matter if the reason makes sense to you or seems good to you. Their action flows from their thought and feeling, which you can't control.

And because your intent was really to change them, you won't be committed to the boundary, you won't be prepared to actually carry it out. So you won't do it most likely. And then you're going to feel worse than you did before. You're going to be mad at them as if it's their fault you didn't enforce your boundary, why couldn't they just change so you didn't have to do it, you're going to be disappointed in yourself and you'll lose integrity with yourself.

So here's how you do make a boundary. You coach yourself until you feel clear. You know that the other person will likely not change their behavior and you are totally okay with that. You know and understand they are allowed to behave however they want and that the boundary is for you. Not to control them. I have to tell you guys, literally as I'm doing this podcast about boundaries and saying that, my cat just started scratching out my grandmother's antique chair. He's like, oh, does this apply to me? I get to scratch this chair no matter what, you'll just leave the room?

It's not the same for pets or children. Okay, so number one, you coach yourself until you're clear. You understand they are allowed to keep doing whatever they're doing. Allowed meaning you can't change it. The boundary is for you, right?

And then number two, you decide exactly what the boundary is. What is a triggering action? What will you do? Don't be vague about it. You got to get really specific. If my mom talks to me about my weight, I will give her one verbal warning that I don't want to talk about it and if she keeps talking about it, I will say, "I love you and I'm going to hang up now," and hang up the phone or leave the room. If my friend comes to my house without calling ahead, I'm not going to answer the door. I'm going to tell her ahead of time that that's what's going to happen. If my roommate kicks my dog I am leaving with the dog. I am going to my mom's house and I'm filing a

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police report the next morning. If someone starts swearing or taking God's name in vain, I'm going to leave the conversation.

These are all just examples. These aren't from my life, these are just examples of various boundaries you might have. You don't always have to tell the other person that you have a boundary. Like, I don't go around telling everybody I meet, "By the way, a boundary for me is if you put your hand on my pants without warning, I'm going to leave." Right? Like, I assume it's pretty unlikely to happen, I know what I'm going to do in the event that it does.

But I don't have to tell everybody that, right? So a boundary doesn't have anything to do with whether you even tell the other person. Like, sometimes you are going to have a boundary that is just for you. So for instance, I had a client who had a family member who when they were drunk would get kind of - would start yelling a lot and being very insulting. Not even actually to her but to other family members. And she just decided that her boundary was she didn't want to be around people yelling insults and that when that was happening she was just going to leave. She didn't even tell this person. She was like, kind of ancillary to the main drama. It wasn't really about her and of course, this person has like, a major drinking problem. If she tells him she's going to leave when he starts yelling, he's not going to be like, "Oh my god, really? Let me stop drinking."

She's not even like, part of the main problem here or the main people involved. So she never told him but that's just what she started doing for herself. That was her boundary. So number one, you coach yourself to be coming from a place of love, especially for yourself, but also if you can, for the other person. And at least a place of acceptance for the other person, that they have human autonomy just like you do and they are making choices with it and they're allowed to do that, right? Not emotionally resisting what they're doing.

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Number two, you decide exactly what the boundary is. What has to happen to trigger it and what you're going to do very specifically.

Number three, you commit to keeping the boundary and you mean it. If you make a half-hearted boundary and you aren't truly willing to follow through, then it is the worst of both worlds. And if you are not in this place, what generally happens is that you will have a hard time keeping the boundary because you want to stay and argue with the person to make them change or you want to storm out but you want to fight with them about it later. You'll know that you really aren't ready to make the boundary because you won't be able to keep it or you won't feel peaceful while you're keeping it.

So one last thing I want to teach you about boundaries. When you're starting thought work, you're going to be tempted to set a lot of boundaries about things other people say or do that are not physically dangerous to you. And it's totally understandable because you're just learning how to manage your mind. This is why the first part where you make sure you're clear mentally and that you aren't believing the other person is wrong and has to change is so important.

And again, not because it makes you a better person. Not because you get like, an engraved letter from the universe saying you're great. It just won't work. If you believe that they're wrong and they need to change, you just actually cannot set an effective boundary. Because then you're trying to use your actions to punish or manipulate the other person and it will never feel good to you. And you won't be able to keep it or you'll want to change if it the boundary doesn't work to make them change, right?

So getting to a place of love for yourself and acceptance or love for the other person, being really clear and being ready to enforce the boundary, none of those are a moral issue. It's just the only way it will work. As I get better and better at managing my mind, I actually find that I rarely need to have boundaries about what people say or do if it doesn't involve kind of physical violation. Violation is a strong word, but I definitely have

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boundaries about physical violence or non-consensual touching and other things in my physical space. Like I would have a boundary if somebody hurt my cat or if somebody was smoking in my house and I didn't want them to.

Like, you know, it's my space so I definitely still have those. And if you have kids also, that's a place that I think most people find that they would have some boundaries on their kid's behalf. Like, if you punch my kid you have to leave my house, or if you tell my kid they're stupid and dumb - whatever, you know, children don't always know how to manage their minds yet. Like, as a parent, you might have boundaries for that.

But I - as I've done so much of this work - really rarely feel the need to have a boundary about words someone says these days. Or actions they take that aren't dangerous to me and don't involve me or my space. Because by the time I've coached myself and I've gotten to unconditional love for myself and acceptance or love for them, I usually no longer really have a problem.

So that's just also something to know and it's totally fine. This is a new concept, you're going to be practicing it. Just always make sure to practice those three steps. Coaching yourself until you are coming from a place of love for yourself and acceptance at least and maybe even love for the other person, knowing exactly what you're going to do when it's time to enforce the boundary, and being really clear that enforcing the boundary means enforcing it for yourself. You're not enforcing it against them. You're enforcing it for your own self. And number three, being really committed and ready to do that.

Okay, so I get lots of questions about boundaries and now we have a podcast about them, so hopefully this will help you guys and help you understand how to handle boundary situations. Last thing, don't forget to enter the Day Designer giveaway. So it ends Friday, September 20th, so if you're listening to this episode the day it comes out, you have 24 hours left to enter. So go to www.unfckyourbrain.com/daydesigner. Again, September 20th 2018 - I guess people could be listening to this in a couple years - to

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enter to win one of the two free Day Designers that go with my episode on constraint.

Alright y'all, 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.