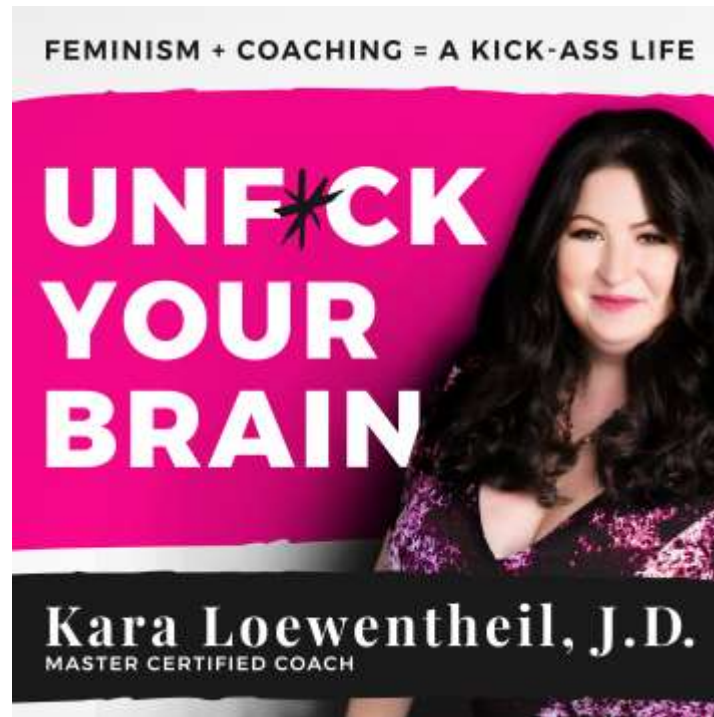


UFYB 48: Listener Q & A Vol. 3



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

[UnF*ck Your Brain](#) with 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, I have a long list still of chicken questions, and so I'm going to answer a few more of them for this podcast, and we're just going to keep doing this until someday we get through them all or the world ends, whichever one comes first.

Okay, so let's see, is there anything I want to tell you guys beforehand? I think that the main thing I do want to tell all of you, because I may not actually be able to get to everybody's questions because this could go on forever, when you write me a question, if I don't answer it, here's what I want you to ask yourself; what do I think Kara would say about this?

A lot of times, what happens, I think, is basically really what goes on in all questions, and I totally get this, my brain does this too, is we accept the concept that our thoughts cause our feelings and that external circumstances are neutral, but we think it doesn't apply to a situation where we really believe our thoughts. That's basically the issue is that we have intellectual buy-in and maybe we have applied it to situations where it wasn't as emotional for us or we didn't believe the thought as deeply.

But then, we get to a situation where we really believe our thoughts about it, and then we're like, wait, how does it work here? And all of our brains do this, of course, but the real deep liberation of this work comes from seeing that pretty much everything you think is an optional thought and a lot of it isn't true.

And that's not about gaslighting yourself and doubting yourself. It's not about going back and forth between is this true, is it not true, can I trust myself? That's not what this is about.

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This is much more about learning that there's two parts of your brain, which is what meditation has been teaching us for thousands of years. There's the part that reacts and has ego and has stories and is motivated by whatever you believe. I believe it's evolution and socialization, whatever else, that is very reactive and always worried about things and thinks it's the victim. It has all of these negative stories and thoughts and creates a lot of intense emotion.

And then there's the part that can observe that; that's the mystery of human consciousness. Like, we have a part of our brain that can observe our own thinking. And so, when I say a lot of your thoughts aren't true, that's not, like, so don't ever trust yourself. Totally trust the part of you that is the watcher. That is the part that we do have to rely on and cultivate.

But don't so much trust all of your stories that create all that negative emotion, especially when it's about how bad you are or how bad other people are. It's just when you look at how those thoughts play out for you, they're just not so helpful. That's why I love the question of, is this thought helpful?

The whole, should I trust myself or not, you can spend forever trying to figure out if something is true and there's no way to know. But if it doesn't matter, if the question is, is this thought helpful, then you can figure that out pretty quickly.

Okay, so let's do some questions. "Hi, Kara, the work you're doing is amazing and has helped a ton in mine and my friend's lives, so thank you..." Prayer hand emoji – I guess I don't need to read emojis. "There's something I keep getting stumped on though; what's the difference between holding realistic healthy boundaries and having too many expectations of others? Other people don't cause our drama, but could we unintentionally become doormats if we don't set the right boundaries and stand up for ourselves? Thank you."

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Okay, so this is a really common fear. I'm going to say a couple of things about it. My cat has something to say about it too, apparently. Number one, I just did an episode on boundaries, so obviously go check that out. That was – I guess when this comes out, that will have been last week. Number two, becoming a doormat is not a real thing. That's not a circumstance. That's not an objective thing.

That's just a thought you have. So you could see somebody who's totally unfazed by other people's behavior and they feel great and they're just living their own life, focusing on their own shit, getting their own stuff done and not worrying about other people. Then you might think about that, "Oh, they're a doormat." But they don't think they're a doormat and their life is working great.

There's no such thing as right or wrong about that. There's not like there's any universal test we could have about whether someone is a doormat. I mean, actually, there is a test which is do you lie down in front of the door and people walk on you. So no humans are doormats.

But I'm not just being silly about the word, that's just true about the concept also. There's no such thing as being a doormat. That's a thought you have about yourself. And I think it's really interesting if we often think, if I don't emotionally resist other people just being who they are, which they're going to do, then I'm somehow being a doormat; I'm letting them get away with it.

But of course, other people already are who they are. And our emotional resistance doesn't make us stronger, it actually makes us weaker. So that's what I have to say about that. Definitely listen to the boundary episode. I do teach there are some situations where you want to set a boundary, but what I teach in the boundary episode is so important that it's not about them or teaching them anything; it's about us, what do we want to be around or not be around? How do we – I don't even like using the word protect ourselves, because I think for those of us who haven't done a lot of

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thought work, it just kind of continues to suggest that other people's words can cause our feelings.

But a boundary is, like, this is what I'm willing to have in my life or be around. I'm going to protect and enforce that boundary out of love for myself, not about them. There's no such thing as the right boundary is the other thing that I see in this question. It's not about, "Oh it's bad enough, now I have to stand up for myself." So I think all this language is really unhelpful; being a doormat, the right boundaries, and stand up for ourselves.

Standing up for yourself sounds like you're doing something empowering, but what you will notice is that you often feel angry or anxious about it, and that's usually because you are trying to control what the other person says or does with your words or actions. So I don't think I ever have to stand up for myself. I think I just need to know what kind of life I want to have and how I want to think and act and just do that, and if other people are bothered by it, that's their problem and they can get out of the way or come around or whatever; it's not really my deal.

Okay, "Hi, Kara, trying not to fangirl and to keep this short because I'm sure you get hundreds, if not thousands, of these emails..." This is true. Okay, I'm just going to summarize this. "I'm worried my insecurities are ruining my first real relationship. My boyfriend of eight months was previously in a long-term relationship over a year before we met. He proposed to his ex and she said no. he still maintains fairly regular contact with her, usually initiated by her. I've told him that it hurts me that they still talk and he doesn't understand why. If someone hurt him so badly, how could he continue to communicate and interact with her if that ship has sailed, as he's repeatedly reiterated? I constantly fear that he still loves her and I'll never measure up in his eyes. What can I do to let go of this fear and insecurity?" As I said, he's generally non-emotive, expressive, of his feelings towards me, so I have no external reinforcement, which I know I

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shouldn't need. I love him and I want to be able to move past his past, let go, and just be happy. This chicken needs your help."

Okay, so there's a couple of things going on here. Number one, there's no such thing as you should or shouldn't need external reinforcement. What I teach is that other people don't actually cause our feelings, and that when we are using them for external validation, it never really feels satisfying. But it's not a moral issue. You're not a better person if you don't need it or if you don't want it or if you don't try to get it than if you do.

So there's no should, it's just useful for you to notice that you basically can't get enough validation from him to make yourself feel good. And I know you probably think, "Oh well if he just spontaneously left me love letters then I would feel better." But that's not actually true. You'd feel better for a minute and then your brain would go, "I wonder if he left the other ex spontaneous love letters. Probably hers were better."

Like, that's what's going to happen in your brain. So external validation just doesn't solve any problem because it's like eating a candy bar; you get a hit of sugar, a hit of dopamine, but then it goes away and now you want more because you can't create it and sustain it. So that's one thing.

The other situation here is that you think that it hurts you that he talks to her, but that's not true, your thoughts hurt you. What he does doesn't cause your feelings. So your real problem is that you don't feel secure in this relationship. If you – like my partner is in touch with his ex-girlfriend, then I literally don't ever think about it because I don't make it mean anything about me and our relationship.

So there's a number of reasons people might talk to their ex. I'm in touch with my exes because they're good people who I was close with and who I care about and I still love them. I don't love them in a way that's a threat to my current partnership, but I still have positive feelings about them when I

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think about them. That's how feelings work, which is a big difference from how the world thinks about it.

But what I teach is, when you have a thought, you have a feeling. So there's no such thing as, like, default loving someone. Like, if you think a positive thought about them, you will feel this positive emotion of love. And then you think about something else and you're feeling something else; you're not even thinking about them anymore.

So you had this story that he still loves her in this ongoing problematic way, whereas I just think, when he thinks about her, he has a warm feeling, he responds to her message, and that's that. Really, it has nothing to do with his relationship with you.

Ultimately, the truth is, if he is still in love with her in a way that is going to threaten your relationship, you're going to find that out and you'll be better off for it. But it sounds, from what you're saying, like he – you said he doesn't give you assurance, but you also say he repeatedly reiterated that that ship has sailed.

So what you want is for him to confine his thoughts and feelings to a neat and tidy box that you pre-approve so that you can feel better, but that's not how it works. You can love him the way he is, with some affection for his ex-girlfriend, even if he has conflicted feelings about it. Imagine if you had proposed to someone and they had rejected you. Think about how hung up you'd be on that person's validation. It would have nothing to do with your current partner.

Now, I'm not saying that's going on with your boyfriend; I just want to show you that there's a lot of different ways of thinking about what's going on over there, but you are filtering it all through, "I'm not good enough." And so you think, if he would stop talking to her then you could feel secure, but

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that's not how it works and you're never going to feel secure from something external.

You said, "I love him and I want to be able to move past his past." You already are past his past. His past has nothing to do with you. It's your current thoughts that are the problem. So what I would do is, if you want a concrete suggestion, I would make it your job to do two things. Number one, just to love him as he is. That's his only job, to be there for you to love him. Number two, to start looking for evidence that he loves you.

He may be non-emotive, he may not express it verbally, but everybody expresses things in some way and so I would start looking for whatever that looks like for you. Does he put his hand on your shoulder when he passes you? Does he buy you that donut that he knows you like? Does he make an effort to spend time with you even if he's tired or stressed? Whatever, right – does he snuggle up to you?

Whatever it is, look for evidence that he loves you and that he is with you now, because he is. If you want to feel loved, you just need to think about the ways that he loves you. There's nothing he can do to produce that for you.

Okay, so next question, "Hi, Kara, I've recently cut out a few family members because they are, quote en quote, toxic and also I think they're narcissistic. It's a mother and daughter. They've done some messed up things to me, always undermined me and just never respect anyone. If you don't do it their way, it doesn't, quote en quote, make sense or it's not right. Or if you have a good idea, they try to be better than you. So I always felt anxious when around them and felt like I needed to be better or not good enough because I was wrong. They make a lot of people feel stupid. But if this is my thoughts, I want to fix it. How do you distinguish if it's just your thoughts or this person really is not good for your mental and emotional health?"

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The short answer is, it's always your thoughts. Other people are not good or bad for our mental and emotional health. Now, that doesn't mean that you have to hang out with everybody in the whole world. I don't find it that fun to hang out with people who are just always criticizing other people and are unhappy and have a lot of victim-thinking and that's all they want to talk about.

I just don't find that fun. It doesn't cause my feelings. It doesn't make me feel bad. It's just I have limited time on earth and that's not really how I want to spend it. On the other hand, sometimes I have to be around people like that and then I'm so glad that I have my thought work; that I know that they don't cause my feelings and it's totally fine that they are the way they are and I can be around them and even connect and relate to them and feel fine.

So other people do not cause, and don't impact, your mental and emotional health. That's you. Now, you said that they're family, and I do want to distinguish, sometimes what happens is, when we were younger, when we were actually children and actually very dependent on the adults in our lives to take care of us, some of us were offered a lot of not that helpful thoughts about ourselves when we were children. And we just didn't even know that we could accept or reject them and we took them on.

So sometimes, when you're dealing with family or with people who were around when you were younger and you were really dependent on them to survive, of course you believed what they said. But now you're an adult and you get to decide what to think and feel and you can manage your mind and you have that control. And so you have this story that they're toxic, they're narcissistic, and that they cause your feelings.

But the reason you feel anxious around them is because you had the thoughts, "I'm stupid, I need to be better, I'm not good enough." Right? So you get to decide whether to hang out with them or not. There's no right or

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wrong answer. But you do want to just see that the reason you felt so bad about them was your own thoughts about yourself which you are blaming on them.

And one of the reasons that I really advise learning to manage your mind – I mean there’s a million reasons. Living an intentional life, I think, is why we’re here. But the baseline reason, if nothing else, is that eventually you will be around people who, for whatever reason, you can’t cut out of your life, and if you haven’t learned to manage your mind and you still think that other people cause your feelings then you’re going to be shit out of luck and you’re not going to have any tools.

So human life means that we will eventually be in circumstances or around people where our brain has a lot of negative thoughts and if we haven’t learned that those are optional and we haven’t learned how to manage them then we have nothing we can do. So that is why I don’t generally advise just cutting out toxic people and leaving jobs and doing whatever else, rather than manage our emotions. Again, boundaries, when there’s truly a violation, is a separate issue. We have a podcast about that from last week.

Okay, next question, “Hi, Kara, due to my social anxiety, I have had a hard time making and keeping relationships with other people and I have a tendency to avoid dealing with people in social situations whenever possible. As a result, I don’t really have any friends or a social life now and I’m very ashamed about this. It has also affected my work when it comes to teamwork and relationships with coworkers. I believe the root of the problem is that I find it hard to open up to others and share my opinions. I think I’m scared to show my true self to others out of fear of rejection from past negative experiences. I know that if I just open myself up to people, they’ll probably like the real me, but I can’t get my mind to believe that. I see some other people who are completely confident in themselves and do what they want without feeling the crippling embarrassment and shame I

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would feel in their situation. I ask myself, how can I become that way? I don't have an answer."

Okay, so here's the thing; I'm probably one of those people you think is really confident. I mean, you don't know me, but how you describe is how I act. It has nothing to do with us believing other people are going to like us. It has to do with us knowing that we like ourselves.

Okay, so you are really judgmental of yourself. And the reason I know that is that you are ashamed about your own anxiety and you think there's something wrong with you. When you think there's something wrong with you, that's basically what you project to the rest of the world. And so what I actually want you to focus on, before you worry about whether other people like you – really you should never be worrying about that, it's not useful – is to really focus on accepting yourself.

So one of the reasons I love this work is that understanding that our thoughts cause our feelings and those cause our actions, there's never any reason to be ashamed of our thoughts or to be, like, confused about why something happened. It just explains everything. Like, "Oh, well I have the thought that other people won't like me, so of course I don't have friends. Not because I'm a bad person or not fun, just because if my thought is no one will like me, then of course I'm going to feel anxious, and of course, my action is going to be to isolate myself. So yeah, of course I don't have friends."

But your brain is like, "See, you don't have friends; there's something wrong with you. See, you're anxious about this; there's something wrong with you." But you're not. There's nothing wrong with you. You just have this thought and it's leading to that result of not having close relationships. So I think the problem is, you're trying to convince yourself, "Don't worry, if you open up to people, they will like you."

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But you can't convince your brain of that because you can't predict it with 100% certainty. Some people may like you, some people might not. The real way you'll find freedom is by liking yourself. So working on accepting – just start with accepting yourself in the way you are, noticing how much you're shaming and blaming yourself.

You've got to start with that. you can't get your mind to believe that everybody you open up to will like you because that's probably not true, and it's not possible. What you have to do is work on liking yourself, and then you will feel able to show your real self to people because you'll know that even if they don't like you, it doesn't mean anything about you. So it always comes back to your relationship with yourself. That's where you have to start.

Okay, “Hey, Kara, would you ever consider doing a podcast episode, or including in a Q&A, how to improve family relationships? I get frustrated when I think my mom is condescending and my sister is self-centered, but I am coming up short in finding neutral thoughts that will make me feel better in family interactions. Thank you for everything you do and share.”

Okay, well not knowing more about your thoughts and your situation, I can't really tell you what to try thinking instead, but a couple of things that I recommend – number one is – here's the truth, y'all. Generally, if you can't see another way to think about a situation, it's because you really believe your thought is true and you're just trying to get away from it.

So my guess is that you really believe your mom is condescending and that your sister is self-centered and you have a lot of feelings that come up when you think that way and you don't want to have those feelings. You're trying to get away from them or you're trying to kind of skip the part where you truly recognize that your thought is optional and that your mom being condescending or your sister being self-centered are just thoughts in your

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mind. They're not objectively true things that we can prove; so that's my guess.

That being said, one of the things I kind of recommend is practicing thoughts like, when the person in question is talking that you are kind of scared of or angry about, just practicing a thought like, that's Bob being Bob, like that's who they are, that's what they do. Or, this is just like the sound of a dog barking. I mean one thing that happens is, we get ourselves really wound up thinking like, "Well I hope this person doesn't do this thing they always do." And then, of course, they do it.

Now, the reason we always see that they're doing it is because we're looking for evidence to prove our thought true that they do it. But before you can even get to that layer, sometimes it's just helpful to start with, like, "Yeah, of course my mom is going to say something about my clothes or my weight or my job or my boyfriend. That's her favorite hobby. That's fine. I know that I like these things."

You're only bothered because of your thoughts about yourself ultimately, so I would practice something like, that's just Sally being Sally, or whatever their names are, or this is like a dog barking, or planning ahead of time, of course they're going to say X, Y, Z, and deciding what you want to think and feel about it ahead of time.

But ultimately, if you can't find a neutral thought, it's generally because you don't really recognize that your thoughts are thoughts and that they're not true circumstances. So you might have to sit there and be kind of miserable for a little longer in that – we call it the river of misery. Like, when you sort of understand that your thought is a thought, but you still really believe it and you just want to, like, get away from it, you kind of can't. You kind of have to sit with it for a while sometimes and really see how that thought is making you feel. And then you'll be able to come up with a better option. Not better, I mean, there's no better or worse, but just different.

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Okay, so let's do one more. "Hi, Kara, I dated this guy for three months. If he doesn't agree with something I do, he yelled and was verbally abusive. I cut him out of my life for about a month and a half and just started talking again. Most of his yelling came from him disagreeing with me about hanging out with my friend, Dave. By the time I agreed to introduce him to Dave, Dave really didn't want to meet him because of the verbal abuse and threats towards Dave and myself. Since we're talking again, I want to make sure I approach the situation with care and fairness. I want to hang out with Dave, but I don't want the boyfriend, or the ex-boyfriend, to get jealous. Is it inappropriate for me to hang out with him? He was my friend before the guy and I got together; why should this even be an issue? I need advice so badly on this; my thoughts are giving me anxiety, thanks."

Okay, I am less interested in whether or not you should hang out with Dave and I am more interested in why you're talking to this guy again. Not because I know what's right for you, but I am just curious. It sounds – you say he yelled and was verbally abusive. It's very hard for me, from the outside, to know what's going on there. But do you want to be in a relationship where somebody yells or says whatever these things were that you think are verbally abusive?

You get to decide – this is going to make some people very and because I'm just supposed to tell you that if you use the word abusive then it's terrible and you should leave. But what some of you chickens may not know is I actually worked in domestic violence for ten years in college and in law school. And I know that what these words mean different things to different people and that the way to empower people who are – if they are in a relationship with an intimate partner with violence – the way to empower someone is not to tell them how bad it is, which they potentially suspect and everyone in their life is telling them, but to actually provide a non-judgmental space where you help them work through their thinking and their options.

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So it's just like a caveat, but since I get so many people being mad that I don't care about domestic violence victims, I would just like you all to know that I actually have a lot of experience in this field. I worked in it for ten years. I wrote a law school thesis about it. I actually know what I'm talking about here.

So that is what I would want you to figure out more. There's no such thing as whether it's appropriate or inappropriate for you to hang out with someone. Those are just your thoughts. You guys have – I think it's totally fine, your boyfriend thinks it's not. We can't get a universal ruling on it.

The question for you is, do you want to be in a relationship where your partner yells at you if you want to hang out with a male friend? That's your question. Is that the kind of relationship you want? And if not, why are you contemplating getting involved with this person again?

This is why, especially in dealing with relationships, I really encourage you to ask yourself the question, like, what kind of relationship do I want? Now, that doesn't mean, well I want my boyfriend to cause all my feelings. But for me, I want a relationship where my partner and I have a lot of independence – that's just my preference, not everybody has that preference – where we respect each other. I definitely am not willing to be in a relationship where anybody yells. I don't yell. I don't want the other person to yell.

There's a million other things, but just knowing the kind of relationship I want, like the kind of boundaries, what my boundaries are, if somebody were to cross them, I just know what I'm going to do. Again, if you haven't listened to the boundary episode, it's the last episode, so go listen to that.

And it doesn't have anything to do with whether they're a great guy or whether we have chemistry or whatever else. So for you, writer, I really

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want you to think about why you are talking to this person again and is this the kind of relationship you want?

And you need to see, you may have thoughts like, he's a good guy, no one else will want me, there's not enough out there, but he says these nice things to me; I don't know why, right. I don't know what you like about this guy that you're talking to, but I want you to think less about that and think more about, what kind of relationship do I want?

This is how this dude is. He's going to yell about Dave, and then we don't know, but it's possible he's also going to yell about other men that you are friends with and whatever, is verbally abusive, whatever that means, whatever he's doing. So do you want to be in a relationship where you have to get rid of your preexisting male friends?

That is the important question for you; not whether it's appropriate or not to hang out with Dave. Okay, so when you say, "Why should this even be an issue?" Because in your guy's head, he has thoughts about it. That's what he's going to be like. You're not going to be able to explain it to him or get rid of those.

So you have to decide whether this is the kind of relationship you want to be in and why, okay. But asking yourself questions about whether it's inappropriate to hang out with him or what you did wrong, that is not helpful for you right now. I just want you to focus on, is this the kind of relationship I want? This is what's being offered to me. I'm being offered whatever the good things are, plus I will not be able to have male friends and there will be yelling and whatever counts as verbally abusive for you; that's happening.

That's what it's going to be like. Now, is this the kind of relationship I want? When you focus on that question, things will become really clear to you, and so that's what I really recommend you think about.

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Okay, my dears, I still have a ton of questions so there will be some more of these in the future, but that's it for today. Have a good week. Get out there, manage your minds, and I'll 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.karloewentheil.com/podcastconfidence.