

UFYB 57: Listener Q & A Vol. 7



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 chickens. It is time for another listener Q&A podcast. Got a couple more of these lined up for the year, and then that's going to be it for a little while, so if you have questions you've been waiting to ask me, now's the time. Send them in. Send them to info@redesignyourmind.com. And, of course, I try to get to the ones that I can, but I can't answer every question I get. I get a lot of questions, and I try to pick the ones that I think are going to have the most learning value for everyone. Right? Because this is a podcast, not an individual coaching session.

Okay, so, let's just get started. What's in the reader mailbag? Okay, so, a question: "Hi, Kara. How do you take criticism graciously? Like, whenever I make a mistake or get criticized, I either clam up or act defensively. When I try to make it lighthearted, I'm trying too hard." Okay, it's a great question. The answer is that you clam up or act defensively because you think it's criticism. Right? Even the way that you asked this question shows me that you can't take feedback and just be curious about it; you think that it's criticism, so you think that if somebody has some thoughts about how you might do something differently that you're being criticized, and that immediately makes you defensive.

You have to look at what you're making it mean. If you make a mistake, are you making it mean that there's something wrong with you, that you fucked up, that you're not good at your job, that you're a bad girlfriend, or whatever you're making it mean, right? When we are very defensive about other people's perception of us, it's because we're making it mean something about us. We're not allowing their thoughts to be their thoughts; we're thinking that their thoughts mean something about us or about them, right, and that something's gone wrong and something is bad. Right? Like, we've done something bad. So, you're clamming up or acting defensively

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because of whatever you're making the "criticism" mean. Right? And then of course it doesn't work to try to make it lighthearted, because you don't believe it is lighthearted, right? So of course that doesn't work, and that just comes across really weirdly.

So, the solution isn't to try to act a certain way. Right? You want to solve it by acting lighthearted, but that doesn't work when your thoughts aren't lighthearted. You have to work on what your thoughts are about it. What are you making it mean? If somebody gives you feedback, or tells you they think you made a mistake, or you do "make a mistake," what are you making it mean about you? That's where the defensiveness and the clamming up is coming from. When we feel terrible about ourselves, we have to push back on anything we perceive that might kind of validate those thoughts and feelings because we're so scared of them.

When we actually love ourselves, other people's thoughts are their thoughts, and it's fine. Like, lots of you have lots of thoughts about what I do on the podcast, and you share them with me, and some of them are positive, and some of them are negative, and they're all fine and wonderful. I don't take it personally or feel defensive, because I'm so rooted in what I think about what I'm doing, right? And so, if somebody has complaints or "critiques," I read them; if there's something I think might be valuable or true, I think about how I want to implement it, and otherwise, it's just not a problem. It's just their thoughts, and they can have them, right?

But if I secretly believed that maybe I was doing the podcast wrong, and I was fucking up, and it's my job to make everyone love me, then it would be really stressful to hear "negative" feedback or criticism, because I would have all these thoughts creating negative feelings about it. So you've got to look at what your thoughts are about the "criticism," and decide how you want to think about it.

Got another question. I've got a couple kind of one-liners that I'm doing today. "Intuition versus bad thoughts: How do we know when to listen to

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ourselves? That's all for now," says this question-writer. All right, it's another great question. Some of these short questions are better than these very long ones. Okay, so, here's how I like to think about it, right? You can take it or leave it for what it's worth for you guys. I think that intuition is still a thought, I don't think that I believe that intuition's something that's not thought, but I think that intuition is a very quiet, calm knowing. So when I've had intuitions about things in the past, or when I do now, I guess, it's never agitating. I don't ever ... It's not anxiety-producing, I don't have to act quickly to get out of it. It's just like a calm knowing.

I almost think intuition is like our perceptions and thoughts, some of which may be true, stripped of all the drama. So, one place I hear this a lot is in my women clients who are dating. If something seems to be "going wrong," like the person's not texting back as quickly, or they think things have changed, they say, "It's just my intuition. I have a gut feeling that something's wrong, it's off, it's not working. He's not interested, she's not interested." Whatever. What's complicated about it is sometimes they are right about that. Like, sometimes you are noticing accurately a difference in how often someone calls you or whatever. But the thing that makes it not just intuition is all of the anxiety about it, the agitation, the desire to act to get away from the feeling. All of that is not your gut. That's your brain, right? That is all of your negative thoughts, because why is it a problem if someone's feelings about you have changed? It's actually not. It's only a problem because of your thoughts about what it means.

So the intuition might be like this quiet knowing of, like, "Oh, I noticed this," and intuition also doesn't tell you what the reason is, or isn't so sure that it knows the reason and that it's a problem. So that's how I really distinguish between them. The easy way to ... It's like a deep question, but the easy way to think about it is that intuition is like just calmly letting you know something quietly. Any time that there's agitation, anxiety, like your brain is screaming, you want to act your way out of it, like you want to text the person, or change something, or take some action and get away from the feeling, all of that is just lizard brain, right? And it's not actually serving you.

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So you say, "How do we know when to listen to ourselves?" I don't think that that's a useful question, okay? That's not the question that I would ask. Always, the answer to that is, "Is your thought helpful or not?" I think that, embedded in the premise of this question, and one of the reasons I don't usually like talking about intuition necessarily, is that embedded in the premise is that if it is intuition, then we should listen to it and act one way, and if it's not intuition, we should not listen to it and act a different way. I don't think that's a helpful framework, because I don't think the question is ever, "Is this true?" and that's how I decide what to do. I think the question should always be, "Is this thought helpful?" whether it comes from "intuition" or my lizard brain or anything else. Is this thought helpful, and do I like the result I get if I think it? Right?

So, I don't really suggest you ask, "How do I know when to listen to myself?" You're always listening to yourself. The question is, do you want to think on purpose about what to do or not? I don't think that the question should ever be, "When should I just believe and act on my unconscious thoughts without evaluating them?" So, I wouldn't frame it as intuition versus bad thoughts. I don't think that that's that helpful.

Okay, another short and sweet one. "Obsessive brain." That's the question. No. "Sometimes when life gets overwhelming, I'll latch onto something and obsess over it or them or whatever it is. I'm aware of it and it bothers me. I feel childish and mentally ill. How can I avoid this, stop obsessing, and just live my life?" Okay, well, that's a big question, and possibly you might want to look into getting a coach. But here's what I can say about this, and I've worked with people who had intrusive kind of fixated thoughts before. You say, "I feel childish or mentally ill." Those aren't feelings, those are thoughts. You have the thought, "I'm childish, I'm mentally ill," which means you are giving a lot of meaning to this thought pattern, right, this obsessive thought pattern, repetitive thoughts. You are attaching all this meaning and judgment to it, and that makes it so much worse for you. Right? Because then you're constantly scanning for it, and then when it starts happening, then you're believing something's gone wrong, and that it means this

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negative thing about you, and then, of course, you're obsessed with how you're obsessed with thinking.

I had a client who had intrusive thoughts, actually, and what we did was we just decided to take the rhetoric and emotional stuff down, and we just decided to call them her hamster thoughts. We're just like, "Oh, sometimes your brain just gets on this hamster wheel." Right? It was kind of cute and funny, and it made it less scary. It didn't mean something had gone wrong, it was just like, "Oh, hamster thoughts." So she spent a few weeks practicing just noticing when they came up and being like, "Oh, those are my hamster thoughts," and just allowing them to be there without resisting them, without making them mean anything. And then what she found is, over the course of a month or two, they really just went away, because she wasn't putting so much weight on them. Right? She wasn't resisting them being there. So, often I teach, like, you want to become aware of your thoughts and then change them on purpose.

Sometimes when you have this kind of fixation or rumination, or really any thought that you're judging really heavily and making it mean something, the best way to work on that is actually to work on the judging thoughts, not the underlying thought. Right? So, I wouldn't start out by trying to "stop obsess," right? Even your labeling it as obsession, you're already judging it and evaluating it, and not just being curious and observant of your brain. So work on the thoughts about the thoughts. That's the best way to handle it.

Okay, somebody says, "Hi, Kara. Something I've always struggled with has been the balance between 'push yourself out of your comfort zone' and 'don't do anything that you're not comfortable with.'" Okay, well, I can just tell you 100%, I do not agree with that last one. "I know the second one generally refers to new relationships, but I've always applied it to the rest of my life too. I tend to believe we all have got intuitions that we should listen to about a variety of different situations." Well, I don't believe that either. Okay, so, dear question-asker, I disagree with all your premises.

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"I'm a recent college graduate jumping into a career and planning on either moving to a new major city soon or moving in with my boyfriend in a much smaller city, with the plan we'll eventually move to the big city. I'm having an internal battle between pushing myself seriously out of my comfort zone for personal development, maybe, or making the move where I know I'd be happy and comfortable, but it would be the easy way out. How do I reconcile this? I know that I should be uncomfortable sometimes for the purpose of personal development, but I have a deep desire to be comfortable and happy."

Okay, I love this question. Listen, all of you: Everybody has a deep desire to be comfortable and happy, obviously, right? Like, human brains evolved to want to be comfortable and happy and safe. So, I 100% disagree with the idea that you shouldn't do anything you're not comfortable with, and I don't believe that those are gut intuitions, right? So I don't agree with any of these premises, because this is just like the previous question. I don't think they serve you. Right?

This is like when people are like, "Don't do anything unless it feels aligned." Like, do you have a human brain? Shit is not going to feel aligned. Like, yes, there might be some deep kind of, "Okay, I think I want this, I'm going to go for it," but it doesn't feel like easy and flow all the time. Maybe for some people it does. It did not feel like easy flow, no stress, to quit my stable and prestigious career and become a life coach. Like, that is craziness. That did not feel like just really aligned and safe and comfortable. No, it felt like I was going to die for at least a year. And thank God I did that, right? I'm so glad that I did.

So, I just think "Don't do anything you're not comfortable with" is like the worst life philosophy, I think, in the whole world. And I know we hear that, and we're taught that it means, like you say, like, "Oh, it's our gut intuitions, and we should feel aligned, and if something's uncomfortable, that means it's not at your vibration," or I don't know, like whatever self-help nonsense is out there. But I just think that's a way to live a life where you don't grow

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or evolve at all, and the truth is, you won't be that comfortable, because you'll stagnate.

And the same about "We have gut intuitions that we should listen to about a variety of different situations." So, you can totally keep that belief. Of course, we all get to decide what to think. But you asked for my opinion, and I don't think that that belief is helpful at all, because I think our gut intuition is often just our anxiety, right? Or our knee-jerk assumptions about things, or our desire to just be comfortable.

Now, listen, you can decide that your goal in life is just to be comfortable, and that's totally fine. Like, there's no rewards at the gates to heaven ... I don't really believe in heaven, but there's no ... You don't get anything, you don't get, like, a medal when you die for having made yourself uncomfortable. Like, you know, there's no moral value to it. It doesn't make you a better person. You get to decide. So, if you want your life to be about comfortable and happy, then go for it.

Now, I want to warn you that your circumstances don't create your feelings, okay? So, being happy is going to be caused by your thoughts either way, and what I tend to see is that people who prioritize comfort and safety, and lack of risk, and lack of discomfort, really, don't end up that happy, right? Because your thoughts are what create your feelings. And I do think that most humans want to grow and evolve, at the same time as we want to be safe. Right? That's the whole human paradigm condition, is like, our primitive part of our brain just wants to be safe, but then we developed this prefrontal cortex, this huge thinking, imagining, dreaming machine that has propelled human evolution forward, and the development of civilization, and that part of our brain wants to do some shit.

And so, we have to decide, which part of our brain are we going to prioritize? And for me, I want to grow and evolve, I want to really live life fully, and that means definitely not being comfortable a lot of the time, and not listening to my "gut intuition" a lot of the time, because my gut feeling is

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often just my unconscious thoughts that I haven't evaluated or chosen on purpose. So, I think that part of what's going on with this question is that when you say, "I know I should be uncomfortable sometimes," there's no "should." You don't have to be. You get to decide, right? But I want to make sure you don't think that having a deep desire to be comfortable in happy is a special thing about you that you should make your life decisions based on, because that's different from how other people feel or something. Everybody feels that way. That's the lizard brain who wants to be safe and comfortable, right?

But happiness is caused by your thoughts, so if you ... It doesn't matter what city you move in, or what job you have, or even really who you're married to. Those decisions aren't what's going to create whether or not you're comfortable and happy; it's your thoughts. And you can decide to prioritize comfort and happiness, or you can decide to be willing to be uncomfortable, but I just want you to choose those on purpose, rather than "should," or just what you already happen to believe, or what you think other people think. That's the work. All right, my chickens, that is it for today's listener Q&A. We'll be back next week. Talk to you guys then.

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.