

## UFYB 63: Listener Q&A Vol. 10



### 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 my chickens. It is time for a listener Q&A. I keep thinking we're going to wrap these up and then I just keep getting more great questions. So here we go.

Alright, "Hi Kara, how would you recommend using thought work to address things from your past? Specifically, things we label as regrets. How do you deal with old wounds? For example, you lost a friendship with someone you wish you wouldn't have. Your thoughts, actions, and words at the time caused a crumbling in a friendship that you now wish you could change the outcome of, but can't go back in time to do so. I'm assuming that regret is just another thought in our minds but I was curious of your take on the situation."

Okay, so regret is an emotion, I think. It's a feeling in our bodies. I think it's like a nuanced version of sadness probably. I think I've talked about this on the podcast before, but anthropologically, one of the theories is that we - there are basically five major emotions that all or almost all humans all over the world share, but of course in English, we have a hundred thousand words for different kinds of emotions.

So I kind of always think of anything beyond happy, sad, angry, ashamed, laughter or joyful, depending on the theory, but anything more nuanced than that, I just think of as being a derivative form of it or like in a family tree, it branches out from under it. So I think regret is an emotion and I think that is it basically sadness. A form of sadness.

Now, you could have regret in a thought if you think, "I regret doing that," that's a thought and you will feel regret or feel sad or feel shame,

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depending on how that thought works for you. So how do we kind of use thought work to address these things?

One of the things that's interesting about this question is that I can see that the question asker does understand thought work, but also doesn't, which is totally normal. We all do this. But you write that your thoughts, actions, and words caused a crumbling in the friendship. The question writer also said that she said sorry or he said sorry and hasn't changed much.

So I just want you to see that you're taking responsibility for how your friend thinks, feels, and acts. So you're seeing that your thoughts created your feelings and actions, but then you're assuming that those control your friend's reaction, and they don't. Your friend is living in her own thought, feeling, action, result cycle. She or he or they, whatever their pronouns has, they're living in their own mind and they have their own thoughts and feelings.

And so you're taking on all this responsibility here and that's why you can't let go of it is because you're telling yourself that it's your fault and that if you had done something differently things would have been different. And when you think that thought, sometimes I think the human brain like basically lacks a great capacity to understand what's real and what's - we invented time as a concept. This is getting deep, but I swear it's related.

We invented time as a concept, the way we think about it. We invented our ideas of past and future. I know that's kind of mind-blowing but we'll leave that for the science version of the podcast. But I think that our brains aren't really great at that. So that's why even though the past is over - like, your stomach is never like I'm just going to re-digest the food I ate a week ago, right? It's like, it's gone. It's not like, let me chew it up again and re-release the enzymes.

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Your body doesn't do that but your brain is like, let me keep thinking about this thing that happened two weeks ago because if I think about it enough, maybe it'll change. It's like our brain can't distinguish between the past, the present, and the future very well, which kind of makes sense because we made them up. It's just like it kind of exists in the present in a weird way. Like, it's always - if it's thinking about it then it's real to it.

So that's the problem with this thought that you did something in the past, and if you just had done it differently, things would have been different. Because then your brain kind of thinks it can still fix it by thinking about it, which it can't. So the one part of solving that is to really recognize that you didn't cause it.

So yeah, you had a thought and a feeling and action, you may have said some things that you now wouldn't choose to say, but your friend also has their own part to play in this. That's not in a blame way. I'm not saying either of you did anything wrong. It just means that whatever thoughts your friend had, whatever their feelings, whatever their results, their actions, their result is not having the friendship with you, and that's up to them.

And it's not necessarily true that if you'd acted differently things would have been different. And you've already taken action to try to communicate that to them and it hasn't changed their mind because you don't control their thoughts. So that's number one.

The second thing and the work that really has to do with you also is forgiving yourself. Having compassion for yourself, and that's a lot easier when you stop taking responsibility for what everyone else does, so they go together. But really having compassion for yourself. I truly - I have no regrets about my life, and it's interesting actually, even before I discovered thought work, I have always been someone who just never had regrets.

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That's not because I have lived my life perfectly or never spoke in anger or did anything impulsive or gave up an opportunity. Like, I've done all those things, of course. But I just always have believed, even before I discovered coaching, that we're all doing the best we can with whatever resources we have at the time. I always believe that.

I don't believe that people sit around being like, "Well, I could handle this better but I just don't feel like it." It's like, however we handle something is by definition the best of our abilities. We're handling it to the best of our abilities in that moment. Whatever mental, emotional, self-regulation, self-awareness resources, whatever we have, we're doing the best we can in that moment and I always believe that.

And so I don't regret anything that I've done because I think I was always just doing the best I could with the tools I had then, and I think as I get older, I don't even think - I don't like thinking about it as I'm not better. I'm just different. I have more awareness, I'm less reactive, I take more responsibility for myself, I take less responsibility for other people.

And so I think I probably act out less or do fewer things impulsively or say fewer things impulsively. There's just a lot more kind of pause and reflection and consideration in how I approach the world. But I don't regret how I was in the past and I don't beat myself up about it.

And so for me, it was such a gift to think - let's say I came to coaching with the thought that we're all doing our best, I don't regret it. What coaching gave me also was an ability to see like, and it's for the best in the sense that everything is happening as it has to happen and it all had to happen to bring me to where I am.

And this is like a concept that I had a lot of trouble with when I started coaching like, people will say, "It's happening for you," or, "Everything had to happen the way it had to happen because that's how it's meant to

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happen or it's part of some plan." I don't believe that, any of that really. Or, "That's perfect because it happened this way," in the sense of good.

But I do think everything happened as it had to happen because in any given moment, we were all just acting out of our thoughts and feelings that create our actions. So for me, it's like if I were going to say everything is perfect, I don't mean perfect in like, this is ideal. I mean perfect in it is whole and complete and had to happen that way based on the thoughts, feelings, and actions that people were able to take at the time.

Like, if we are all doing our best based on what our brains are saying and telling us, then something is - it's whole. It's perfect in that it exists and happened that way because that was the only thing that could have happened because the people involved had those thoughts and feelings and actions in their minds.

It's like this way of thinking about the world where it is perfect in the sense that it is whole and it happened that way, even though it is not perfect in the sense of it didn't feel good and things - people died and it's not what we would have wanted to happen. It's not what our limited human mentality would have wanted to happen.

And I think that kind of thought process often gets associated with a religious perspective and that's not my perspective. I'm not religious and I don't really believe in a divine creation, but I do believe in the idea that our perceptions of what's good, bad, or should, shouldn't happen are all just from our human mind. The world just exists outside of us. It is neutral. And there's way of seeing that that's like, it is perfect in and of itself in the sense that it is whole and it is what it is.

Okay, that was a kind of long, deep digression. But it's all related. I don't know, for me these things are all related and this is why I love geeking out about this stuff. So if you got to minute 12 of this episode and you're like,

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"What the fuck is she talking about," don't worry, I'm going to stop talking about how the world exists.

Okay, those are my thoughts on regret. I actually should do a podcast episode on regret. I think it's a great topic so I will do that. Alright, next question. Keep it much more concrete.

"Hi Kara. Thanks for your amazing podcast. I completely love them and they've helped shape my thoughts in a much more positive way, but there's one fundamental area I can't get my head around. So that is how can someone change their thoughts about a physical attribute about themselves they hate, that is fact. In my case, it's my nose. It's not small and it has a bump and I was told that by school kids when I was younger and it's held me back my whole life. Even though I'm now happily married, I never got over it and I don't know how to change my thoughts about something that is 100% fact, which is that it does have a bump and I do hate it but I don't want surgery. So how can someone like me learn to still..."

Kind of beautifully ironically, she left out the word love or like here, but I think that's what she meant. "Learn to still love myself despite that." Okay, so you're a little bit confused, dear listener, about what facts are. I'm going to agree with you that there's a bump on your nose. I do not agree with you that you hating it is a fact. You hating it is a set of thoughts and feelings you have. That's not a fact.

So you can't say to yourself, "Well, my nose has a bump and I hate it so how can I love myself even while I hate my nose," that doesn't work. That doesn't make sense. The question to ask yourself is how can I love myself and how can I love my nose that has a bump on it? Can a person love a nose with a bump on it?

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Like, is that possible? I want you to really think about it. Do you think there's a person in the world that has a bump on their nose who doesn't believe it's held them back their whole lives? Because you are blaming your nose for holding you back, but your poor nose has done nothing to you.

Your thoughts about your nose are what have held you back your whole life. Think about it. You have been blaming so much on the fact that your nose has a bump, even though a lot of noses have bumps. I mean, for all we know, maybe most noses are supposed to have bumps, right? Some noses have like, three bumps probably.

So your nose having a bump, that is a fact. I'm going to give it to you. I mean, it's still kind of vague and people would probably disagree about how big of a bump is actually a bump, but let's just say it has a bump. Let's say it's the Quasimodo of noses. But you hating it is not a fact. You hating it - hate is an emotion. You hating it is a result of your thoughts about it and everything you're blaming on it.

So the way to learn to love yourself is not to try to love yourself despite having a bump on your nose. Because that implies that the bump on your nose is a bad thing or a problem. Your job is to learn to love yourself as someone who has a bump on her nose. But I would start honestly, because given your - what it sounds like how intensely you hate this - I would just start with practicing being open to the idea that the bump on your nose might be neutral and actually have nothing to do with your life.

That the bump on your nose has not held you back, it has not interfered with your life, it has actually done literally nothing but sit there on your nose, and it's all your own thoughts that have held you back. So I would just start by being open to that, like being open to the idea of not blaming your nose for what your brain has been doing, and then you can work up to loving yourself. I think a bump on a nose is cute. That's my thought about it. People can have very different thoughts about these things.

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Okay, "Hi Kara, first of all, let me thank you." You're welcome. "For your amazing life-changing work. I replay episodes of your podcast every day and it has been a life saver." I'm just going to pause and say I hear this from a lot of you and I actually love it because sometimes when my brain wants to be mean to me, it's like, you talk too fast on your podcast and you're teaching it like, too high a level and it's confusing people and you need to dumb it down.

But then I just love that you guys are all like, whatever, I'm just going to listen to this 12 times until it makes sense. So it's like thank you, I actually appreciate that, so I can keep teaching at the level I want and we can all have fun. And if you don't re-listen to them and you are confused, just re-listen to them.

Okay, here's her question. "After listening to your podcast for two months or so and practicing thought work, I feel far less emotionally reactive than I used to be. Yay." The yay is in the letter. Just so you guys know. I feel yay about it too but to be clear. "My question is if others do not cause our feelings and we do not cause others feelings, is there a need to "tell our side of the story" if someone comes to us with a complaint about how we, in their minds, have hurt or wronged them? Should we expect it of others? If we manage our minds, is there ever a need to "speak our truth?" I feel less and less of a need to do that these days. Is that an expected outcome of practicing thought work?"

So yes, actually. I mean, that's my experience, totally. So there's never a need to say anything. So you say is there a need to tell our side of the story, is there a need to speak our truth, like, those aren't needs. Those are desires, inclinations, wants. Maybe you want to do those things. I think those thoughts are very charged, like tell our side of the story or speak our truth, we're already in this very defensive posture.

But really the question is like, we know that everybody causes their own feelings, but other people don't know that and they still sometimes tell us

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that we cause theirs and is that a problem. I don't think it's a problem at all, and this has been my experience too is that I just don't feel the need to do that. And what's really interesting is like, in the beginning of course I always wanted to do that, like tell my side of the story, defend myself, tell them - make them acknowledge my truth.

And then in the middle, I sort of felt like neutral, makes sense, right? That's the next step. It was like, I wasn't upset that they felt that, and I didn't feel the need to tell them my side of the story, so I more just wanted to just like just be like, okay, well we disagree, and like, it was calm, it was fine.

But these days, I actually find I feel actually much more willing to be like, I'm so sorry. To just apologize. Even though I know that I didn't cause their feelings because it doesn't cost me anything. It's like this little gift or kindness that I can give to them because they think it's going to make them feel better even though usually it doesn't. Sometimes it does.

I mean, their thoughts always make them feel better but like, sometimes if you apologize someone's thoughts change. Often, they don't change. It doesn't really do anything anyway. But I just find now that like, when somebody thinks I've done something wrong, I'm like, so much more comfortable just being like, oh yeah, good point, or like, oh, I'm so sorry, or I'll try to keep an eye on that.

It's like the kind of charge of it is so removed and I'm now so much less defensive than I used to be because I kind of don't take responsibility for those thoughts and feelings, and I know they have nothing to do with me and I know I'm okay the way that I am. So I'm like, not judging myself for having maybe screwed up, which is what makes us all defensive, and I'm not taking on their thoughts and feelings or thinking I'm responsible for them, and I don't need them to like, like me or not be mad at me or think a certain way about me for me to feel okay.

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So I just am like so much less attached to the whole situation and in the beginning, that manifested as me being like, I understand what you're saying and I see things differently and we can agree to disagree, or whatever. And now sometimes I'm just like, you're totally right. Sometimes they are. It's like, it's still a thought so it's not just like right or wrong, but the less attached I am to my story, the more I can see how other people's stories make sense to them and like, from their perspective, that's what they saw. That's what they experienced.

So yeah, that is my experience and I think that is kind of an expected outcome. But I'm going to now go through the example you gave me and let's see if it kind of applies here. So she said, "To provide a little context if you need it, my husband and father recently got into an argument where my husband told my father that my husband knew that my father was an abusive alcoholic when I was a child. I had told my husband that in confidence and I have never talked about it with either of my parents. My father told me that I was a liar and made all that up. I didn't, and now he doesn't speak to me. Friends and family say I should apologize to him, or at least try to talk to him about it. My thought is I don't cause his thoughts or feelings. He stated what his thoughts were, I feel that I should just work through this with thought work on my own."

Okay, yeah, I think this is a great question example. So number one, your friends and family have their own thoughts about it and that's really none of your business, it has nothing to do with you. They can have those thoughts, that has nothing to do with you and what you want to do. In terms of how you want to approach this, I don't think that the question is like, what's the right or wrong thought work approach because it totally depends.

The question is how do you feel about this? Is this the feeling you want to have? And is this the relationship you want to have with your father? And there's no right or wrong answer to that. So if you feel really centered and good about this and you feel like listen, that was my experience, I shared that with my husband. Now, I didn't ask him to share that with my father but

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he did. I was not lying and I'm not going to apologize or take back having told my husband about my experience and I'm okay with not having a relationship with my dad because of that and that's up to him and I'm not going to take any action to make a relationship happen.

If you feel great about that and those thoughts feel good to you and those are your reasons, your reasons feel kind of calm to you, then I'm all in. I do want to show you that there's no right or wrong answer because a person could equally think well, that was not how I wanted - I wouldn't have chosen for my husband to tell my father that that way but let's go back to question one, that's what happened. No point in regrets. I want to have a relationship with my father, I understand why he would not want to agree with me about what happened, and it's more important to me to have a relationship with him than for us to agree about what happened in my childhood. So I am going to reach out to him.

Neither of those is right or wrong. So that's why I wanted to go through your question, specifically with this example because I think in your head you're sort of like, well, I don't cause his thoughts or feelings and so it's not my responsibility and I'm not going to. And that is totally fine. You're right that it's not your responsibility, but that's not like, the correct thought work answer.

There is no - yes, there's a correct thought work answer in that you don't cause his thoughts and feelings. But in terms of like, how to approach him or what to think about this specific situation or how you want to act, there's no right answer. It depends on how you want to think and feel about your father and what result you want. Whether you care about having a relationship with him, how much you care about that, what you feel or think you're willing to say or not say, and how that feels to you.

So I would just really check in with like, does this feel good to you? Is this the result that you want? Does it feel right to you? Or do you feel like you're angry and resentful of him and you're like, his thoughts are his problems, I

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don't have to do anything, he should learn about thought work. Just check in with yourself and see how these thoughts are feeling to you and if you like the results you're getting.

Okay, "Hi Kara, I've been doing lots of your brain work." I love that term for this. I'm doing brain work. I'm a brain worker now. "And one thing keeps coming up that I'm not trying to deal with. I've lost a few friends and loved ones in the past tragically and have a fear of losing others. I would say this is a daily thought for me. How do I teach my brain to not automatically go to that place of loss and instead see a hopeful future with these people in my life? I'm usually a very positive person but my confirmation bias, thank you for teaching me that, is that I could lose this person or that person any time. I would love to relearn that in some way. Thank you for all you do. One of your Southern chickens."

I like the idea of a bunch of Southern chickens. Okay, dear reader - I mean dear listener. I have that Jane Austen dear reader in my head. So a couple things. Number one, I would listen to the beginning of this podcast because that whole regret conversation kind of speaks to this also.

One of the things that I think is interesting is that you say my confirmation bias is that I could lose this person at any time. Well, that's true, a person could die at any time, but your confirmation bias could also tell you that you often don't lose someone. You might have more people in your past die than are still alive. Like, have more of your loved ones die than are still with you. If not, then your confirmation bias could also be looking the other way.

Like, this is the problem with our brains is that our brain is like, oh, one or two people I was close to died, now I always have to worry about that because it definitely could happen. Sure, also what could happen is that people don't die. We have way more examples of that.

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So I don't think it's exactly about confirmation bias here. I think what it's about here is that you are afraid of how you will feel if this happens. If someone you love dies, you're afraid of how you will feel. And you're basing that on how you used to feel in the past.

And so that kind of means two things. It means, one, you're afraid of your emotions, which is super common. So if you're not willing to have feelings of loss and grief, human life is going to be really stressful for you because loss and grief are part of human life. Negative emotions is a part of human life. To love someone is to be open to losing them.

And so if you're not willing to have those feelings, your brain will always be vigilant about trying to worry about them and look for them and try to kind of prevent that, which of course it can't do, so it's just constantly stressing out about it. I mean, what's so sadly ironic about this kind of thought pattern is you're already giving yourself the experience of losing them every day because you're worrying about it every day.

So you're forecasting how it will feel and you're already creating that for yourself. So sometimes I coach people on something like this, this kind of pattern. I just say like, listen, you're an expert at how to lose this person and keep going because you're mentally doing that every day. You've already been in that place.

So if you are really resistant to having the experience of loss and grief that happens if you lose someone you love and if you want to think the thoughts about that, then it's going to be very hard for you to not constantly worry about it. The other thing to think about is yes, loss and grief are a normal part of human life. Most people experience them and want to have the thoughts that create them because we - I want to be sad if someone I love dies, that's part of the kind of rich tapestry of human experience.

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But your experiences in the past were when you had an unmanaged mind. So often I think that even though we might choose to feel grief or loss when we lose someone we love, if we don't know about managing our mind and we don't know about our thoughts, we are often confusing an intensity or an experience of grief and loss that came from an unmanaged mind.

Because even in something like grief or loss, there are very different ways to experience it based on whether you are afraid of your emotions and resisting them and not willing to have them and what kind of stories you're telling yourself about what it means that the person is gone. Those will make a huge difference.

Like, there is a huge difference - let's say your husband dies. There's a huge difference between I am going to mourn the loss of this person I loved, I want to feel sad about that, I want to think about everything I loved about him and I want to create a space to mourn his passing, and I'm willing to feel the sadness and I welcome it to come in and it will be with me as long as it needs to be with me, and I'm willing to have this experience, this is part of my human life.

That's very different from I can't believe this happened, this is so unfair, I'm never going to find love again, he's been taken from me, why do these things always happen to me, no one else has to go through this, I'm never going to find love again, now my life is over. On the outside, both those people will look like they are grieving. But they're going to be having very different internal experiences, especially if that second one is also unwilling to have their feelings - thinks their feelings are going to kill them and never go away and then there's kind of trying to escape the feelings.

So you have to think about if you lost someone now, what would that experience be like if you were managing your mind, if you were not resisting it, if you didn't believe it was going to ruin your life, if you were willing to have the feelings. And so if you can kind of do those two things together, like see how your past experience were shaped by your thoughts

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then, and how it might be different knowing how to manage your mind now and not resisting your emotion, that in my experience is the only thing that kind of makes future negative emotion feel less scary.

You have to embrace that human life involves that negative emotion, and the truth is you did lose people in your life before and you survived and you've had a happy life in a lot of ways, right? And I'm saying that because you say you want to see a hopeful future, you're usually a positive person, so like, you did survive and your life has gone on and it's been happy. And the same would be true if you lost someone else you love. It could be true for you.

So that was a kind of long answer, but those are the things I would be thinking about. If you tell yourself that something that could happen is going to ruin your life, your brain just won't be able to stop thinking about it. So you have to really be willing to have that experience.

This truly - this is going to be my closing words for you guys today. It is so fascinating how much just being willing to have a negative emotion completely will change your life. Even in small moments, even little things like being, I don't know, tired and having to go deal with family, or even like a small breakup with someone you've only been dating a little while.

The difference between resisting that emotion, the difference between oh my god, I don't want to have to feel anxious or sad, that's so horrible, what can I do to try to change this feeling, I really don't want to have it and oh my god, what if I'm sad later tonight and I'll just be sad by myself. Like, what if the difference between that and I'm willing to feel however this is going to feel, it's just going to be a physical sensation in my body, and it's going to pass and it's totally harmless and I'm just willing to feel it, what if I was just willing to feel however this is going to feel and I knew I would wake up tomorrow morning and do it again until it passes.

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Just the difference between those two orientations towards yourself and your experience will really change your life. Alright my chickens, that's it for today. Great questions. I will talk to you guys 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](http://www.karaloewentheil.com/podcastconfidence).