

UFYB 67: The Struggle Bus (How to Deal with Negative Emotions)



Full Episode Transcript

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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. How are you all? I have just had an amazing weekend. I'm recording this on a Monday. I have been really trying to intentionally create my weekends to include all the things I want, which are lazy time, culture time, friend time, date time, and it's been a really nice balance so far.

I highly recommend deciding on purpose what you want your weekends to look like and then scheduling those things, rather than just kind of letting your time happen to you. I teach this all the time, of course, but I think sometimes we think like, oh, I scheduled my week so now my weekend is my free time. But if you schedule things in your free time, it actually feels like you have more time and you enjoy it more. It's kind of like a room looks smaller before you put furniture in it.

So one of the things that was interesting for me about this weekend was that at the same time that I was having this lovely kind of weekend that I had created for myself, I also was feeling some low-level anxiety on and off for most of it, which is unusual for me these days. My brain had some things it was working through and I just was not able to coach myself to a new thought that felt better yet.

So I just allowed the anxiety to come along for the ride, and it reminded me of what an important lesson this is and so that is actually what I want to teach you guys today. This podcast is a little bit on the shorter side but I recommend you listen to it like, maybe 1700 times. It's so important and it's honestly like, we have to relearn what I'm going to teach in this podcast today over and over and over again.

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We will learn it for one day and then the next time we have a negative emotion we will have completely forgotten it. So this is one of those ones I really recommend you return to over and over.

So what I see in a lot of my students, and I remember this for myself when I first discovered thought work and like, occasionally even now, is that when I first discovered thought work, I'd been so anxious and so insecure for so long and I was so desperate to feel better. And thought work offered me a way to feel better and that's what I wanted to do, so I got really, really good at changing my thoughts to thoughts that felt better.

What I did not get as good at at first was allowing negative emotion to exist in my body without resisting and trying to change it. So I had spent years trying to get away from and get rid of my negative emotions, and at first, I kind of used thought work as a tool to do the same thing.

Now, it was a better tool than like, pizza or shopping had been for changing negative emotion because while pizza is delicious and shopping can be fun, they don't actually change your feelings. They certainly don't change your thoughts, so they don't actually work for the intended purpose. And changing my thoughts often did work, so it was for sure a step up. It was a step in the right direction, but it wasn't always the solution because sometimes we aren't able to change a thought immediately.

And this can be especially challenging for those of us who are good at changing thoughts. When I train new coaches, I see this sometimes. Some of them take to changing thoughts like a duck to water and they always want to change their thought right away. They always to rush to change their thought.

But sometimes that isn't possible, and there's a couple reasons that can happen. Sometimes we actually haven't figured out what the thought causing the emotion is. It's still opaque to us. Even if we've done a thought

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download like we're supposed to and we've written it all down, but like, nothing we write down seems like it's quite it. We work through all those thoughts and we are able to shift everything we wrote down and yet we still have the feeling.

So it's like we haven't quite figured out what's going on. Sometimes I think we have figured out what the thought causing the emotion is, but we still just really believe the thought. We want to change it, but we can't believe anything new yet.

Now, that's really different from knowing the thought and choosing it on purpose. When we choose a thought that creates a negative emotion on purpose - I don't even like the word negative in this context, just if we want to feel sad when someone passes away for instance, that's not a problem. So that's not what I'm talking about in this episode. I'm not talking about when you choose to have a negative thought and feeling on purpose.

I'm talking about when you know it's a thought causing your suffering, and you would rather not be suffering but you really believe the thought still. So you feel caught in that place where you see that it's a thought, you understand that intellectually at least, you don't want to feel the way you feel, but you are not able to change the thought because you still really believe it. You believe that it's true and that you have to think it and you can't imagine what else you would think.

So, sometimes we can see the thought but we're not able to change it yet. Sometimes we do have a new thought we're practicing, so we're like, not knowing what the thought is is level one, seeing the thought but not being able to not believe it or believe anything else is level two maybe, and then level three, sometimes we do have a new thought we're practicing, we're getting some relief there, but we also still believe the old thought.

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And so we have these moments of relief, but then we also have these periods of suffering because we're working on retraining our brain's automatic thought patterns. But the old ones are still so comfortable, so it's like we're trying to climb up a hill and we keep sliding down and then we try to climb up again and we slide down a little bit. We're making progress overall if you look from where we started to where we are, but it's not linear.

So those are kind of the three situations in which I think we see that there's a thought at play and we may or may not know what it is, but we can't change it yet. And my teacher calls this experience of knowing a thought causes your feelings but not being able or ready to change it, she calls it the river of misery, which is a good name, but makes me think of white-water rafting, which I really hate, so I like calling it the struggle bus.

Here's why I like calling it the struggle bus. I think that the idea of a struggle bus acknowledges that you are struggling and that's okay. So often we think we shouldn't be struggling. If we're feeling challenged and stretched and things seem hard and we're only sometimes able to think or do what we want, we think something has gone wrong. But it's okay to struggle with new concepts. It's okay to find it challenging. It's okay to find it difficult to change your thought patterns.

It's supposed to be challenging. That's part of the deal. This is why most of the world doesn't do it. It is hard to think on purpose, compared to think not on purpose. It's hard in different ways. Thinking not on purpose is hard in that it's exhausting and relentless and you feel terrible. Thinking on purpose is hard because you have to use brain energy and your brain doesn't want to, and you've always thought the way you've thought. It's a new skill.

So the struggle is part of the deal, it's just part of the journey and thinking of being on the struggle bus helps me remember that I'm supposed to be struggling with it. I'm trying to take a well-worn groove in my brain and

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redirect the river to create a new riverbed. I'm trying to redirect the Grand Canyon, so of course there's going to be struggle, it's going to be challenging.

The other reason I like the term struggle bus is that a bus is moving. A bus goes somewhere. You may be struggling but you're still moving. And one of the things I see so often in my students is that they are desperate to change their feelings and so they try to rush the process. They aren't willing to sit back and take a ride on the struggle bus. They think that being willing to be on the bus, being willing to be with their negative emotion means that they're sitting still or that they're backsliding, or that something has gone wrong.

But I want you to think about this; a bus is moving even if all the people on the bus are struggling. You can still get places even if you are feeling negative emotion. If you're willing to just be a person who's on the struggle bus sometimes, you can actually get somewhere on that bus even while you're struggling. It doesn't mean struggling against the emotion or believing it shouldn't be there. It means letting the emotion hop on your back and taking it on the bus with you.

This is a bus where everyone has a little struggle on a little leash that they're taking along for the ride. It's so important to be willing to take the struggle bus around town. Let me tell you, for two reasons. The first is that negative emotion is a part of life. It always will be. If you are constantly resisting it and trying to rush away from it, you're going to spend a lot of your life in resistance, which feels terrible.

Byron Katie says, "When you argue with reality, you lose, but only 100% of the time." When you are resisting and you think negative emotion shouldn't be there and you're not willing to get on the struggle bus, or really the truth is you're already on the bus. You're not willing to see that you're on the bus

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and accept it, you're creating so much resistance. It's so exhausting and such a waste of energy.

And you really can't get much done if you are in resistance. And you can't get much done if you're only willing to take action when you don't have any negative emotion. So I see both things happen. I see my students be in resistance and that paralyzes them, exhausts them, drains their energy, or I see my students say to themselves like, "Well, I'm having a negative emotion so I just need to allow it," but what they're really doing is wallowing in it.

They're like, I have a negative emotion so I can't do my work today because I just have to feel this negative emotion. And that is not a way to get your shit done or to get anything done in life. You want to be able to allow the emotion but still do whatever you need to do. That's why the struggle bus is a bus.

It's not a struggle seat. It's not stationary. It's not a struggle chair on the sidewalk. It's a struggle bus. We get on the bus, we take the struggle with us, it's okay. We're still going somewhere, right? We're still going to be able to get through our day, we're still going to be able to do whatever we need to do so we are allowing that emotion to be there with us.

And you're always going to have times you have negative emotion. So when I train new coaches who are really good at changing their thoughts, so that's why they love thought work and they've decided to become coaches, sometimes they have a really hard time not just changing the thought right away. They don't want to sit with a negative emotion, and they don't see why they should because they're always able to change their thought.

And what I say to them is like, maybe so far, but there is going to come a time when you are not able to change the thought. No matter who you are,

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you are going to have an experience of negative emotion where you can't change your thought right away and you're going to wish that you had practiced allowing negative emotion and developing the tools to cope with it. Because if you're always rushing to change your thought and you're not willing to be present with your experience, it's going to bite you in the ass at some point.

So that is reason number one that it's important to be willing to be on the struggle bus is that negative emotion is a part of life and the sooner we get comfortable with that, the better. The second is that it's actually the willingness to be present on the struggle bus that allows you to eventually change the thought and get off the bus.

So it's like if you imagine we're on the bus but we're like, no, I hate this bus, I don't want to be here, I'm not on the bus, and we're throwing a temper tantrum on the floor of the bus and we totally miss our stop because we're in such denial and resistance about being on the bus, or we just pretend we're not on the bus. We're just in denial and we're like, I'm not on a bus, and meanwhile, the bus is taking us way past where we actually need to go because we're pretending that we're not on the bus.

Being willing to be on the struggle bus and be aware and present and stay with your experience is how you actually get the ability to eventually get off the bus. You can see when your stop is coming and you can get down. In modern society, we are so flooded with ways to escape our feelings and thoughts, but when you're constantly stimulating yourself with things like alcohol or food or shopping or Netflix, you never get a chance to actually let your brain work.

I like to think about professions or endeavors where people think about problems. So think about a theoretical mathematician or a physicist. They will work on a problem for years. They will have some problem that they are

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trying to understand and they will work on it for decades even. Or artists will work on creative problems for a long time.

It's not a problem in the sense that something has gone wrong. That's not what problem means in this context. A problem is just something you don't understand yet and you're trying to understand. And your brain needs some space to work on complex problems. No one ever came up with a Nobel Prize winning theory while watching Netflix and drinking an entire bottle of wine at the same time.

Your brain needs space and time to puzzle over complex problems. Now, this is so important. I want to be really clear. This has nothing to do with making decisions or figuring out right answers. That is not what we're talking about here. This is not in conflict with everything I teach. There's no right answers to what you should do or how to think. You should not sit around puzzling over decisions, telling yourself you have to contemplate a decision for 10 years like you're a physicist.

We're not talking about making decisions or believing there's a right answer to things. What we're talking about is when you don't yet have total clarity on what's going on in your own brain, the problem is your own thought process, that's what you're trying to understand better. It's really more like a creative process.

Sometimes when you're experiencing a lot of negative emotion and you can't figure out why, you need to give your brain some space to play with the problem, to look at it from different angles, turn it inside out, try on some hypotheses, try on some different thoughts, see what happens. Create space for your brain to sort of get some clarity and tell you what's going on.

It's very different from like, well, I think this, I think this, and I can't decide which decision to make so I'm just going to think about it forever. That's not

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what we're talking about. We're talking about when you are having a lot of negative emotion that you can't really sort through, being willing to sit with it and give your brain some space to think about what's going on, some of which may even be subconscious.

And I think the final transformation is when you can come to enjoy that process. When you are stressed or resisting negative emotion, you are creating cortisol and other stress hormones in your body, and those actually inhibit creative thinking and problem-solving. Just think about it like humans probably didn't invent the wheel while they are being chased by a lion that was trying to eat them.

They came up with the wheel when they were safe in a cave and they had some time to think and play with the prototypes. Running away from a tiger after that, they might have been like, you know, I wish we had a way to move faster, but they didn't come up with the idea for the wheel while they were running and terrified.

So if you're willing to be on the struggle bus, you give your brain some time to play with the question and figure out the answer. If you're willing to stay present with it, you will see your stop when it's time to get off, as opposed to having your eyes closed and drinking wine and listening to music trying to distract yourself, you're going to miss your stop, or throwing a tantrum and missing your stop.

So the next time you're resisting your negative emotion and you're thinking something has gone wrong because you can't change a thought yet, I want you to consider that this might be an invitation to even deeper work. What if you can't change that thought yet because it requires a whole new level of awareness that you need to create or unlock within yourself? And what if the only way to get to that next level is to be willing to be on the level you're on now?

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You have to ride the struggle bus to get to the high-speed train. But if you can relax and allow the process, the struggle bus is not so bad, and it can actually be beautiful in its own way because it means you're going somewhere amazing. You just don't know where yet and that's okay.

Have a lovely week, my chickens, on or off the bus. But I'll see you on there.

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.