

UFYB 72: Your Skepticals: Cognitive Bias, Neuroscience and Negative Thoughts



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. How are you all? Today's podcast is a little maybe - I don't know if I would call it off brand, but out of character maybe. I'm not really the silly goofy type. That's not really my kind of MO. But my friend Rachel and I came up with this idea recently and it is such a metaphor that I am willing to do a whole podcast episode about it just so you can learn it.

And also, I want to tell you before we get started to stay tuned, not only to learn this amazing metaphor, but I have another giveaway this week. If you missed last week's giveaway, in last week's episode I gave you instructions on how to get my recommended reading list, so go back and check out episode 71 about love. Today I'm going to teach you how to get a free worksheet that's going to help you apply what this episode teaches. So stay tuned for that at the end.

Alright, so my friend Rachel and I - so by the way, I have a lot of digressions today. Rachel is an amazing coach. Her name is Rachel Hart, and she's the host of the Take a Break podcast, which is all about how to reduce or stop drinking. So if you are wanting to reduce or stop drinking, you should check her out. You'll recognize some of what I teach, but she also teaches a whole bunch of different stuff and of course, all with a very different focus than what I teach so I highly recommend it.

So that's who Rachel is, and Rachel and I came up with this idea recently of skepticals. I'm going to explain what those are. I just want to be clear that I'm sacrificing my dignity for your all benefit. This episode will probably

UFYB 72: Your Skepticals: Cognitive Bias, Neuroscience and Negative Thoughts

be on the short side but it's such a powerful tool even though it sounds kind of silly, and I promise if you apply it, it will totally change your life.

So Rachel and I were talking about rose-colored glasses and she's a coach and we coach each other, which by the way, those of you who - sometimes you guys write me emails and you're like, "I know I should be able to figure this all out just based on your podcast," like, no. I teach you everything I know. I'm not holding anything back, but of course you can't always figure everything out just by kind of doing your own self-coaching. That's why people hire coaches and have coaches.

And I am a master coach and I've been doing this for years and I've taken the work to such a deep level and I still get coached. Rachel is the same, and we still coach each other because you need that outside perspective sometimes. So any of you who have been getting down on yourself for not being able to figure out everything in your self-coaching immediately just from the podcast, I just want to hear me when I say that no one does that and it's normal to need outside help or perspective with your coaching.

So, Rachel and I were talking about rose-colored glasses and I was saying that I think that there's the opposite of rose-colored glasses. That when we have certain thoughts, we see everything through the lens of those thoughts. So it would be like, gross-colored glasses. I didn't come up with that at the time.

Then suddenly Rachel yelled, "It's like you're wearing skepticals," instead of spectacles. It's skepticals instead of spectacles. I want y'all to know I had to spend five minutes on Google making sure that was the right word because I started thinking about the word spectacle, like someone makes a spectacle of themselves.

UFYB 72: Your Skepticals: Cognitive Bias, Neuroscience and Negative Thoughts

And then I was like, wait, is that the same word as spectacles that you put on your face? It turns out yes, it's the same word. I mean, they have different definitions, they're spelled the same. And then I just - you know sometimes you start to say a word too much or you read a word too much and it completely loses its meaning and you can't tell what's going on anymore? And it's like, you have forgotten your native tongue. That's what just happened to me with spectacle and spectacles and skepticals.

This is quite the episode. The opposite of rose-colored glasses are skepticals. Rachel likes puns a lot more than I do. It's really - it's tough on our friendship but we work through it. So like, let's talk about what that means. What is your imaginary pair of skepticals? What are you being skeptical about?

So here's what's wild about your brain. Your brain is basically - I don't know if you guys know this, but your brain is constantly editing what you see but then telling you that it's just objectively recording the world. It's like your brain is actually the MTV production room making the video for the real world where it's cobbling together little bits of footage to make an hour. But then it tells you that it's just like it's shooting a 100% straight documentary.

It's like your brain is on acid all the time but it tells you that it's sober. If you ever wondered for example, why you don't see your own nose. Most of you have probably never thought about this. You can't see your own nose even though it's right on your face, like between your eyes. You should be able to see it if you try.

If you're not driving, I want you to experiment right now. Try to see your own nose by looking down. You really can't. You can sort of almost kind of tell where it is, but you can't actually see it. But if you put your finger on your nose, you can totally see your finger. Even if you put your finger up

UFYB 72: Your Skepticals: Cognitive Bias, Neuroscience and Negative Thoughts

close to the top of the nose, where it's almost flat against your eyes, you can see your finger.

Aren't you glad that you came to my science class today? So, why? Why can you not see your own nose? But you can see your finger when you put it in almost the same place. That's because your brain filters your nose out of your visual representation of the world.

So you actually do see your nose in the sense that your eyes certainly get light waves that bounce off your nose just like off everything else, but your brain is like, she doesn't need to see that, and cuts it out of what you're seeing. Your eyes are seeing your nose all the time. It's an object in your sensory field, light bounces off of it like anything else. It goes into your retina like any other light wave.

But your brain literally just disregards that stream of signals so that you never see your own nose. I know it's like I'm talking a lot about a cute fact a seventh grader might have learned, but I promise you if you really sit with and think about this, it's like the entry to a whole other level of understanding what's happening with your brain.

Because the nose is not an exception. It's not like, oh, your brain objectively records everything else, just not your nose. Your nose is like, one of the many, many things that your brain edits out or distorts, but I'm just using it as the entry example. So I really want you to think about that.

You are seeing your nose in the sense that light that bounces off of it is going into your retina, but you are not seeing it in any sense that is real to you because your brain just decides to not show you that shit. Your brain is just like, "No, she doesn't need to see her nose. She's just never going to

UFYB 72: Your Skepticals: Cognitive Bias, Neuroscience and Negative Thoughts

see it. Every single time she's looking anywhere, I'm going to edit her nose out."

Like, that is how powerful your brain is when it is deciding what to show you. That's what I really want you to understand. Your brain is not just recording reality like it's a live streaming video camera that captures everything. Your brain is constantly editing and revising and shaping and filtering experience and it's feeding you this very constructed and interpreted illusion of reality.

Some philosophers and scientists would say that we're all just kind of living in a joint hallucination because our brains are mediating the sensory input we get so much to create what we experience as reality. And to give another example, I may have told this on the podcast before because I've personally experienced not seeing my nose all the time too, but I've also personally experienced the psychological study I'm about to tell you about.

So there was a famous experiment in which people are shown a video of two people passing a ball back and forth, and people are asked to count the number of times the ball is passed. And multiple repeated studies have shown that when people are told to focus on counting the passes, they literally will not see anything else that happens in the video.

Like, in the original experiment of the video they had a girl walk through with an umbrella. The one that I was shown in law school, somebody dressed in a gorilla suit walks through the screen and I was shown this video and told to count the passes so I did, and I myself did not notice the gorilla.

I like to start with the nose example because some of you are listening being like, "I would have seen the gorilla," but you don't see your own nose,

UFYB 72: Your Skeptical: Cognitive Bias, Neuroscience and Negative Thoughts

do you? And you would not have seen the gorilla either. Your brain literally ignores things that don't match what you believe or have told your brain to see.

So when we talk about confirmation bias, when we talk about how your brain just finds evidence for the stories you already believe about how people treat you or what kind of person you are, what kind of person they are, whether you're lovable or whatever else, this is what your brain is doing. You will literally not see evidence that contradicts it.

If you tell your brain to look for evidence that you are not lovable, your brain will literally just disregard any evidence to the contrary. It won't even tell you that it's there. It will ignore it. And your brain is not trying to be an asshole. I know it seems like that sometimes. Your brain kind of has to do this, at least on the sensory level because essentially if you think about it, your sensory systems are exposed to an endless amount of stimuli every day.

If your brain had to sort it all from scratch every time, it would be overwhelming. If every time you saw a table you had to figure out like, what it was and what it was doing there and was it too heavy to drop on your foot and should you knock into it and where was it in space, like, if you had to figure that out from scratch as if you'd never seen it before every day, you would never even make it out of the house in the morning.

So your brain uses its past experience to fill in what it expects to see or what it thinks it doesn't need to see. So if there's always a table in your living room, your brain fills in the table for you. I'm sure most of you have experienced that you'll notice that something is broken or missing at some point and you'll realize you have no fucking idea how long it's been like that, right?

UFYB 72: Your Skepticals: Cognitive Bias, Neuroscience and Negative Thoughts

You have just some general memory that at one point it was not broken or it was there, but you can't remember when the last time you even saw it was. Because your brain has just been filling in what it expected to be there for who knows how long. Your brain just was using a shortcut. It's almost like it took - your brain had like a photograph of what the room looked like at one point and then it just kept showing you that photograph, even if actually stuff had changed in the room.

Or if you've ever been mad that someone didn't notice you changed your hair, this is why. They literally didn't see it. And your brain does this not just with visual sensory perception but with thoughts and judgments and reasoning as well. It takes the same shortcuts and when we're talking about thoughts or judgments, we call those heuristics, to get all Greek on you.

And again, that's often helpful because it means we can get through the day without total informational overload or having to kind of reason from first principles to understand every single thing that happens all the time. Like, to figure out can I eat this thing or what is one plus one, or if x then y, we have these shortcuts that we don't have to figure everything out over and over.

And again, it evolved because it was helpful in some ways but often it is really damaging in ways that we literally can't even see. And that's because our skepticals, like our noses, our invisible to us. To bring it back, so your skepticals are like the glasses you wear when you have a certain thought pattern or belief and those glasses, they filter out anything that contradicts that belief.

It's like the information literally doesn't even get to your brain. So often my clients want to convince me that their negative thoughts must be true

UFYB 72: Your Skepticals: Cognitive Bias, Neuroscience and Negative Thoughts

because they have so much evidence for the thought. So they want to show me all their evidence. It's like a child with their shells they found on the beach. They want to show me each piece of evidence and tell me about it, and then they want to prove to me that it's obviously true because they don't have evidence on the other side.

That's the mistake of thinking like, well my brain is totally objective and just telling me about reality. So if there was evidence that no one loves me and evidence that people do love me, I would totally see both and I only see one so the other evidence must not exist.

And then they're confused that I'm unimpressed by this reasoning, and it's because I know of course they only have evidence that supports their belief because that's how the brain works. Anything you believe, you think that you believe it because it's true. And you tell your brain that, so of course your brain has only noticed the evidence that it can use to support the belief, or it's totally worked the evidence and decided to interpret it as being one thing when it's really another.

Your brain will literally filter out things it doesn't think you need to know or see. Your brain doesn't really know the difference between a story that helps you or hurts you. If you tell it to only find evidence that you're not as smart as everyone else, then like, those are the skepticals your brain is going to put on and it will see everything around you through that lens.

And what's really wild is that this isn't even just about interpretation. It's actually what you see. Think back to the nose or the gorilla example. If you have a belief that your hair is frizzy, you will see your hair as frizzy. Your hair could be 50% less frizzy one day than the other day but you won't even notice.

UFYB 72: Your Skepticals: Cognitive Bias, Neuroscience and Negative Thoughts

And your hair could be not frizzy at all, but if you're wearing your skepticals you will see it as frizzy. Your skepticals are the biases that are created by your thoughts and they color everything you see. Your visual landscape that has no nose in it is not a reliable map of your face because your face does have a nose.

And similarly, your mental landscapes are not reliable as representations of objective truth. Your brain sees things that aren't there and doesn't see things that are there all the time. It's true about your nose and it's true about your stories about yourself and everyone else.

And that's why asking yourself whether a thought is helpful is so much more useful than asking if it's true. Now, sometimes when I teach this, my students are kind of resistant and they think that it's sort of scary to think that they can't trust what their brain is saying to them. But here's why there's really nothing to be afraid of.

I'm not saying you can't trust your brain at all so nothing it ever says is true and you should just live in chaos. That's not what I'm saying. But it's more like you're operating a computer and it's important to realize that the computer follows whatever program you put in it. So you have to be sure that you like the operating instructions you gave it and want to keep them.

And you can't just look at whatever the computer is producing and believe that it's like, just an objective reflection of reality. You can use your conscious intentional brain to examine what your unconscious unintentional brain is doing. That's the mystery of consciousness that makes all of human reflection possible is that we can watch ourselves thinking. Part of the brain can observe the brain itself.

UFYB 72: Your Skeptical: Cognitive Bias, Neuroscience and Negative Thoughts

So what that means is that it's worthwhile to question all of your all-standing belief systems because almost none of them were chosen consciously on purpose. And so you've been unconsciously running a program in your brain to reinforce and deepen those beliefs over and over for your whole life to only find and see evidence that supports them.

So if you take away one thing from this podcast, this is what I want you to think about and remember. The fact that you have a lot of "evidence" for a belief actually has literally nothing to do whether it's true or not. It's just irrelevant. It's like if this were an argument, if I were running the court of thought work, I would just declare that all that evidence was inadmissible because the witness, your brain, was biased.

So if you just completely took that out of the running, if you just decided that all of your evidence for a belief really was unrelated to whether it was true or not. All that evidence you have doesn't prove that your thought is true. All it proves is that you have a biased investigator looking for evidence to make the case for that belief. All it proves is that you have been wearing your skepticals and that's coloring what your brain is willing to see.

So this is a simple but really profound teaching and the deeper you go in seeing where you're wearing those skepticals and how you're interpreting whatever exists outside of us to match your own beliefs, the kind of wilder the ride gets but the more freedom you find.

So to really help you implement it, I want to give you a worksheet you can use. A worksheet doesn't sound that fun. It's like an exercise. It's a practice. Who am I kidding? Of course, all of my chickens love worksheets. All you type A overachievers are like, a worksheet?

UFYB 72: Your Skepticals: Cognitive Bias, Neuroscience and Negative Thoughts

Yes, so I'm giving away - it's a worksheet. It's an exercise, it's a practice, whatever you want to call it, that you can use to help adjust the prescription on your skepticals. So here's how you get it. You text your email to 347-997-1784 and then you will get a reply asking you for the password or the secret code and you text the word skeptical. Just the word skeptical, like you're skeptical of someone or something. That word.

We'll put it in the show notes too, in the episode description has skeptical in it. So if you get confused or can't spell it, it's in the episode title. Skeptical, no S. So text 347-997-1784. Text your email address, all lower case. You'll get a reply asking for the word and then you text the word skeptical. And then the worksheet exercise will show up in your inbox.

And like I said last week for the reading list, please use whatever email address you have that's already on my email list if you are on my list. If you already get emails from me, use that same email address or you're going to start getting everything twice.

So text your email address, 347-997-1784 and then when you get asked for the code or the word, text skeptical and we will send you the worksheet, the exercise, and you can give it a try and keep me posted on how it goes. Alright my chickens, I will talk to you next week. Don't wear your skepticals too much this week. Bye.

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.