

UFYB 76: Anger + Something New



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. How are you all? I am feeling totally high on life today. First of all, it's light outside. I'm still not over that. It's light until like, seven. But more importantly, this is not a seasonal affective disorder podcast. I am working on something so amazing and exciting for you all that I have a hard time containing myself about it and I want to tell you all about it but I can't for a few more days.

But I can give you some hints. So, if you think about this podcast, now that there's over 100 episodes, it's practically like a college course in thought work. But the problem is you only hear it yourself alone, so it's kind of like doing it on audiobook or something. It's like going to college online.

But if you only went to college online, what would you miss? You would miss the fun. And the fun is important. You'd miss the community, you'd miss making lifelong friends. You'd miss having all those late-night talks about life and the world and your future. It's actually the people and the conversations you have that make any learning experience meaningful and real. That's why college is not just called here's a textbook, read it for three months and then take an exam by yourself.

It's why you have lectures and TAs and discussion groups and homework assignments because it's conversation application and sort of trading of ideas and deepening your understanding through talking that really helps you take learning and turn it into real transformation of your mind and your life.

So it's not enough just to learn the ideas in isolation. So studying the podcast is great, but what if you had a way to study it with each other and

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talk about what you're learning and get help applying it to your life? Plus, hang out with me every week and get bonus tools and teachings that would help you get unstuck so you can actually change your thoughts? That would be amazing, right?

It is. It's going to be amazing, and I'm going to announce what it is and how you can get access to it on the podcast. So we're going to do a little bonus episode and it's going to be Monday April 15th, so just a few days from when you're hearing this. A little special episode with all the details. But this is really important. I'm only making it available for sign up for one week.

It's only going to be open for a week because I really want people who are motivated and engaged and excited about doing this work. So if you're not on my email list because you'll hear about it if you're on my email list, you can come follow me on social media. On Instagram I'm just karaloewentheil, all one word, or on Facebook, it's easy to find me online. There's only nine people in the country with my last name.

So you are not going to want to miss this. It is going to make all your dreams come true. It's going to be amazing. Okay, but before we get to that, before we get to feeling amazing, we got to feel bad for a while. Life is 50/50, some of each.

So today I want to talk to you about one of the most intense negative emotions we can all feel. This is just the kind of thing you'll be able to get help with in the new top secret amazingness I'm going to announce soon. So let's talk about anger. I really find anger fascinating because I think it's such a polarizing emotion.

Some people think anger is this huge terrible problem and then some people think it's this powerful amazing resource, which I think just goes to show that it's what you think about anger that matters. So let's talk about

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what anger is, what causes it, and then how to know whether your anger is working for you.

So anger is an emotion. It's one of the basic emotions shared by all humans. One of the basic six like fear or happiness. And for many people, anger feels very intense. It often feels very hot, especially in the face. For many people it's hard to think clearly when they're angry. Your heart may beat faster, your mind may start racing.

When you're angry, your oxygen intake goes up and your adrenal glands release cortisol and adrenaline. That's why some parts of being angry can feel like anxiety. The racing heart and mind, the feeling of being tense, the feeling of wanting to explode and get release because your body is tensing up. With anxiety it's to run away, with anger it's to hit something.

Similar physical symptoms. And some people experience almost a blinding sensation when they're angry. We actually have that term like blinding rage. It can become difficult to see. You may get literal physical tunnel vision when you're angry, or I think part of what happens is you're so distracted by your physical experience that you stop perceiving the world around you.

So anxiety and anger have in common that they're both responses to a perceived threat. Anxiety is fear, the threat is a danger and you want to like, hold still so it doesn't see you or run away. You don't want to engage with it, basically. Anger is the response where the threat is a danger and you want to fight it. Run away, don't engage, or punch it in the face. That's the difference between anxiety and anger.

And I think which response you have can depend on a lot of things, including your personal set of thoughts and your physiology, but there's social conditioning at work too because - especially at least in American society, men are socialized, people raised as men are socialized to express

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their negative emotions through anger, while people raised as women are socialized to express them through more often, anxiety or sadness.

And since these emotions have similar physiological experiences, it makes sense that which one you default to, which one you understand the feeling as or which one you even have can be impacted by socialization. Because we teach people socialized as male that their response to danger should be to fight it, so they may be more likely to experience anger.

Whereas we teach people who we socialize to be women or female that the best response to danger is to run away or to try to diffuse the situation. We don't teach them to fight back. So anxiety or fear may become the more common response. These are obviously big generalizations and of course women get angry. But because of socialization, I think many women don't recognize or acknowledge their own anger.

And in my experience as a coach but also just as a human, I find women more often than men will try to cover up their anger with another emotion or will deflect it. They often don't realize that they're angry at all. They don't realize that's what they're feeling because women are taught that anger is unladylike or unseemly.

And then I think the socialization has had a backlash where some people now really celebrate women's anger as "natural and valuable" and the idea is that women have suppressed their anger to their own detriment historically, they've been taught to do that, and that owning their anger is valuable and important, and that it'll be useful because it will help them set boundaries or change things.

So I will hear now women say things like anger is natural and healthy, which I think is super interesting because among other things, we say that to women, we tell women now in some parts of society that anger is natural and healthy. We try to encourage their anger response but then we tell men

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that their anger is entitled and violent and dangerous and want then to be less angry.

So how we think and talk about these feelings is socially constructed in both directions. Like oh, anger is good for these people, they should be more angry, but not these people, they should be less angry. It's just interesting.

I don't personally choose to think of anger as either good or bad. I just think it's an emotion like any other emotion. I am always in favor of people of any gender or no gender being real with themselves about what they are thinking and feeling. Allowing and processing feelings is one of the main things we are learning to do around these parts. Around these parts is the podcast, in case you didn't know that we were cowboys here.

At the same time, I don't think that anger is inherently good or bad. I don't believe that anger is some kind of pure guide to identifying injustice, which is I think what a lot of us think subconsciously, that our anger is telling us when something is unfair or unjust or wrong.

Any emotion can be useful or not useful. You always have to decide for yourself. I think there's some obvious ways that anger is maybe not helpful. It clouds your thinking, it increases your stress response. Like any form of chronic stress, it can have long-term negative effects on your health. And not knowing what you're thinking and not thinking clearly is in my experience, never that helpful.

Now, obviously ignoring your anger or pretending you don't have anger or any other feeling is also not helpful. So that's not the other option here. What you have to remember is anger is created by your thoughts. It's not inherently helpful or not helpful or healthy or not healthy or a good or bad idea. It's just a set of sensations created by your thoughts, whoever you are.

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So you have to look at the thoughts causing it and decide if it's helpful to you, and I think anger can be a challenging one to work on because it comes on in such a hot flash, it feels so sudden. But it is caused by a thought and you can figure out what that thought is if you pay attention.

And as you pay attention, you'll learn your favorite patterns. I think with any negative emotion like anxiety or fear or anger or sadness, we tend to have - it's like the theme song in a movie. Go to thought patterns that we're like, any time we have that feeling, it's because one of those few songs is playing.

And so mine are - I like to be really mad when inanimate objects aren't doing what I think they should do. So if you're a machine and you're not working, I like to be mad about that. And when people ask me to do something that I don't think is my job. So when I have the thought that's not my job, I get angry. And usually the thought is that's not my fucking job, and then I feel anger.

Now why are those my two hot points? Who knows? Who cares? It's good that I know them and I can be on the lookout for those thought patterns to turn them around. I think as with any feeling, the important thing is not to tell yourself you don't know why you got angry, but not to shame yourself for it either. You felt anger because you had a thought. It's not moral. It doesn't mean anything about you. It's just a feeling. If you ask yourself why you're angry, and you don't take I don't know for an answer, you will figure it out.

So there's one important caution or caveat I want to make here. I think it's really crucial and a lot of people misunderstand. I think a lot of people think that their anger is helpful or a good idea because they think it causes them to take productive action. Now again, I can't speak for the whole world. All I can just speak for is myself and my clients.

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I have found that it is pretty rarely the case. I think that anger is sometimes correlated with taking productive action, but it's not usually caused by it. remember, correlation just means that two things are happening kind of approximately at the same time or in a particular sequence, but doesn't mean that one caused the other.

This goes back to the distinction between positive and negative motivation and action that I talked about a lot in the what about sexism episode. So I'll hear people say things like, "It's important to be angry about misogyny so we do something about it." So that sounds plausible, everybody nods, but that's because we are taught that negative emotion leads to positive action. And I don't actually find that to be true.

So take for example you're in a meeting where someone says something that you believe is sexist. Now, if you get angry, what happens? Now your face is hot, your heart's beating fast, you've got a lot more oxygen flooding your brain and body, your muscles are getting tense, your muscles want to explode with action because they're primed to run away or hit back, so what do you do?

Maybe you snap something at them before you think through what you want to say. Maybe you run out of the room in tears. Maybe you sit quietly and fume and shake the whole time. Maybe you try to suppress your anger because you're scared to say something. None of those seem like awesome options to me. How is your anger helping you there?

Now imagine if you could register the comment, feel calm, decide on purpose if you truly did believe it was sexist and if you wanted to say something. You would weigh your options, you could think strategically, you could act accordingly. To me, that seems like a much better option.

Being able to choose how to think and feel doesn't mean you are uncaring or cold or not passionate. I am extremely passionate, obviously, about

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women's equality and liberation. And I know that part of my own empowerment is keeping cool so that I can think and feel the way I choose, rather than being reactive and experiencing my thoughts and emotions as being beyond my control.

I think we - and I mentioned this earlier - I think we have the mistaken idea that our anger is a divining rod to injustice or unfairness, that it's telling us something is unjust or unfair and that we need it for that reason. But you actually don't need anger to alert you that something is against your values or contrary to your values. Your thoughts are what do that. Your values are determined by your brain.

So I don't believe that you need anger to identify injustice or something that you don't agree with. If you remove the reactivity and the anger, you will still notice it with your brain, you can identify it using your mind and still choose how to think and feel so you can decide on purpose the best way to handle it. I don't think that anger is an essential aspect of any of that.

And the same is true in your personal relationships. Feeling angry at your partner or your child isn't necessary. There's nothing wrong with it either. Anger is like any other emotion. It's going to happen sometimes, depending on what we're thinking, and that's fine. Just important to know your goal. Are you trying to stay angry, and if so why? And do you like that reason? Do you like how you think and feel when you're angry? Are you getting good results that promote the whole reason you're angry?

Or we could take anger at politics as an example. I coach my clients on this a lot. Many of us think that it's our anger that motivates us to take action to change things. But again, remember what I taught in the what about sexism episode. What motivates us to take action is our positive hope, however slim, that things could be different. It's our belief that our actions matter and can change things.

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Even if we believed we couldn't change anything, if we had the belief that it was important and a value of ours to stand up for what we believe in, even if we knew we were going to not make a difference but we believed it's important to me to stand up for this thing, that's still a positive thought. It's still about living your life with integrity and being true to who you are and sort of making a stand for your values. That's still a positive thought in that sense.

It's not coming from anger. If we only felt negative emotion like anger, if that's all we feel, we normally end up face down in a bottle of wine or buying three pairs of shoes we don't need because humans buffer to escape negative emotion. So you always really have to check in with yourself and see if that anger is serving you.

Is the anger actually producing something you want? Does it just happen along with some other more helpful thoughts that do create productive action? Remember my chickens, it doesn't matter what the academic experts say or the feminist blogosphere says your mom says or I say.

The question is always is the thought helpful for you? Is it creating a feeling you want to have? How is that feeling making you act? Do you like that action? What result are you getting when you take that action? Do you like those results? Those are the important questions.

No emotion is inherently good or bad or useful or useless. It's all about how you feel, how it makes you act, and what results you get, and you have to decide that for yourself. These are all the kinds of questions that we are going to work on and you can get more help with as soon as I announce my exciting surprise on Monday, so stay tuned.

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.

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