

UFYB 79: Attachment Styles and Personality Tests



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 spring, which in New York City it just means it's raining all the time. We're also humid and cranky about it because you know, in the winter we want it to be spring, and then it's spring and we're mad at it, which I just kind of love because this is what human brains do.

We think that when we get to this other place or we have this other thing we're going to have a totally different human experience. When I take that vacation, when I have that job, when I get married, when I get divorced, then I'm just going to feel so amazing.

And then we get there and we're still having the same old human experience of a mix of positive and negative emotion, and we're like, that's weird, the experiment didn't work. I guess I better just repeat it exactly the same way. We just start to fixate on the next thing.

So it's just so good to notice in myself that I wanted the weather to be different and now it is, and I don't feel any different. And then my brain says oh no, I meant different in a different way. No, tomorrow it'll be sunny and I'm still going to have a human brain.

So, that's just my musings on the weather. It's like our little elevator chat about the weather. That's not what we're talking about today. So today I'm going to be talking about two things I get asked a lot and they may not seem obviously related but I think they go together, and that is attachment styles and personality types or tests.

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So, if you don't know what attachment styles are, it's a concept in psychology that has to do with how we experience intimacy and emotional attachment, particularly in romantic relationships, supposedly based on our childhood patterns. And the book people have read most often is called *Attached: The New Science of Adult Attachment*, and then there's an even longer title to it but that's the basics. It's by Levine and Heller.

And so the concept is basically that there are different templates for how people deal with romantic attachment and the three main categories are anxious, secure, and avoidant. And so anxious means that you respond to intimacy with anxiety. You want a lot of closeness and interdependence because you think that'll make you feel safe.

Anxious people worry a lot about being - anxiously attached I mean, people worry a lot about being abandoned or their partner not loving them enough. And avoidant means that you respond to intimacy with anxiety or fear also actually, but that your idea of the solution to those feelings is to want distance.

And so some people who are avoidant may actually feel anxiety that they feel like they would feel better with distance, and then some people might more experience it as feeling numb or closed off. But basically, avoidant people equate intimacy with a loss of independence.

And then secure means that you have what the authors think of as the healthy or appropriate level of attachment and investment. So you can tolerate and enjoy intimacy, but you're not codependent. You're warm, you're loving, you're stable.

This is a very rough overview but the details really aren't important for kind of the purposes that we're going to be talking about it here. So that's attachment theory. And then personality tests, that's kind of self-explanatory. There's a million different ones out there. The ones I get

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asked about most often are the MBTI and then Gretchen Rubin's Four Tendencies, for some reason.

I think maybe because I was a lawyer, I don't know why that one I get asked about a lot. I think because perfectionist type A brains like them because she also has a perfectionist type A brain. But there are others, there's enneagrams, that's one a lot of people are into. Some people would say astrology goes in this category.

So I'm going to tell you the value I see in these things before I tell you why I don't love them. You probably knew that was coming. So, I think that humans are always looking for ways to understand their mental states, their motivations, why they think and feel and act the way they do. If they don't know about coaching, then they don't know why.

And it's comforting to come across some kind of schematic that promises to explain why you are experiencing all the emotions of being a human. I do think that humans, most of us or at least some of us have a kind of drive to understand ourselves and these kinds of categorizations to help us do that.

They seem to help us understand other people as well, which of course is like, why other people are the way they are is one of the enduring mysteries of human life that we spend a lot of time thinking about. And so I think any schematic - when I say schematic I mean like, any kind of overview of different ways of thinking about or categorizing something.

Many of these categories do capture a range of human patterns. I think that that's more true of the ones that are based on actual psychological studies than the ones that are just kind of made up, but you know, even anecdotal observation by an insightful person can produce some pictures that seem to resonate.

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And since many of us don't really understand ourselves very well, if we don't know about thought work, I think having a category or a type may help illuminate certain patterns for us and that can be helpful. I also think one place that really helps us is with our shame because most of us tend to believe that there's something wrong with us just in general, that we're not good enough, there's something wrong with us, we're different.

And personality types or attachment styles or any other kind of categorization like that, it sort of helps us not believe there's something wrong with us and it lets us say, "Oh, I'm just that kind of person and there are other people like me." So it gives us a sense of identity and belonging and some sense of control.

Even though we really aren't exercising control, we at least believe that we now understand ourselves better and we can sort of predict how we might do things or respond to things and that feels comforting. Something like attachment theory, which is a psychological theory with research under it, I think it can illuminate for people that the way they are thinking and feeling isn't because their thoughts are true but because they have brains that like to think a certain way.

And that's actually an element of thought work, so I think that can be quite helpful also. So that's the value that I think attachment theory or personality theories or personality types or whatever else can have. And again, these things are not all equivalent. Obviously like, attachment theory based on psychological studies probably has more substance than a BuzzFeed quiz about what kind of caterpillar you are.

But here's what they all have in common, the way that I think about that; here's what I don't love about them, and I want to preface this because people are very passionate about their MBTI types. I've had people unmatch me on online dating sites for not knowing my MBTI or not caring what it is.

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Please do not bother sending me email about how you really are ISFJ, whatever, and it's so helpful. If you find it helpful, that's totally great. I am not telling you to not believe it, I'm not telling you it's not true. I get asked my opinion about this by listeners a lot. Oddly enough, this is one of my most requested topics, especially attachment theory but also MBTI.

So I'm going to share my opinion about it. Also, to be totally honest, I'm not entirely positive MBTI is the right acronym. I tend to get acronyms confused. I mean that personality test where you have four letters like INFJ. I'm pretty sure it's called MBTI.

Anyway, I get asked about this, I'm going to share my opinion about it. If you think what I'm saying makes sense then maybe it'll be helpful for you and if you love your MBTI type and it explains everything about you and you want to believe it, go for it. Not my business to tell you what to think.

So here's what I don't love about them. I think that when you take on the identity as any particular type of person, that can kind of calcify. It can harden. Because what I teach is that you create what you believe, so if you believe you are a certain type of person, you will become that person. And that could be amazing or it could be a terrible idea.

I teach all the time that we should decide on purpose what kind of people we want to be and then become those people. But the crucial difference is that we're deciding on purpose. The problem with personality tests is that they're basically a survey of your unconscious, unmanaged mind. So it's like diagnosing you with a lifetime disease based on a symptom that's actually totally curable and doesn't have to be that way.

So in my own experience, I used to be one type on the MBTI and I don't remember which one it was, and then I retook it recently after kind of five years of self-coaching, and I got a much different score. I had my old result so I could compare them, even though I did not remember which acronym it

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was. I'm really bad with switching letters around. It wouldn't help, I'd probably give the wrong one.

But what was really interesting to me was that my original test, my scores were kind of extreme on each of the axis, wherever they were, and now my scores are very close to the middle. And in fact, I took it a few times and there were some questions where I was kind of on the fence or I didn't feel strongly about it and I switched how I answered those and it came out totally differently.

Now, of course, you take a test and give different answers, you get a different result. But it was interesting to me that in all those cases, my scores were much more near the center of the spectrums and that those questions were ones where I truly felt like I could go either way now, where I didn't use to feel that way before.

The same with attachment styles. I started out with thought patterns that most closely matched anxious attachment, but now I most closely match secure attachment and that's because I deliberately changed my thoughts through painstaking work that we're creating the anxiety around intimacy and romantic attachment.

So what I don't like about any kind of personality test or schematic like that is that the way that it evaluates you is based on your unmanaged mind, and then it tells you that's the kind of person you are in general. But that's not true. That's just the collection of unintentional thoughts you currently have.

Let's say that again. When you take a personality test of any kind, based on your unmanaged mind, what is happening is you are being diagnosed or categorized based on your unintentional thoughts, your unconscious, unmanaged thoughts, and then you're being told this is the kind of person you are.

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But it's not the kind of person you are. That's just the kind of thoughts you are currently having because you are not thinking on purpose. And then to make it worse, we often try to use those to tell other people why we have to be the way we are, or why they should change how they are to accommodate the kind of person we are, which is so counterproductive.

This goes back to an earlier podcast I did about how you don't really have a personality, just a collection of thoughts you can change. And if I can say this about myself, I think it's one of my more underappreciated podcasts. I mean, people do appreciate it, I hear about it, but to me, it's like that is fucking mind-blowing.

What do you mean that you don't have a personality? You are not a certain kind of person. You don't just have certain types of preferences. Like, all the things that we think create the identity in the self, they're just thoughts. And you can actually choose them on purpose.

Now, I'm not saying you should change your personality. We all have parts of our personality, by which I mean we all have thought patterns or collection of thoughts that we love and we don't want to change, or we have some we don't love as much but it's just not a priority to work on them and that's fine too.

But it's so different to know that it's a choice, just a thought pattern, but versus thinking it's the kind of person you are and you can't do anything about it. So for me, I don't want to identify with any of my thought patterns, other than the part of my brain that can observe my own thinking.

And so whether you call that the watcher or consciousness or the soul, whatever it is, maybe it's just electrical signals, right? That's the part of me that I want to identify with, although, who knows? If I lost my memory or had brain damage, I don't know if I would have that part anymore.

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But I don't want to identify with any other thought pattern because I want to always know that everything else is just thoughts and it's optional. Even if I've chosen them on purpose and I like them, I want to remember that I could make a different choice about them at any time. If my thought work goes deeper or in a different direction.

So even if there's an aspect to my thought patterns, my "personality" that I like, I still don't want to believe that it's inherent and essential and just has to be that way because what if I grow or evolve in some way where I want to change it? Even I think introversion and extroversion are taken to be kind of gospel right now in our particular society, and I think those are created by our thoughts.

I have become both more extroverted and more introverted through thought work. I'm more extroverted in the sense that I don't have social anxiety anymore and I don't believe other people can drain me, so I enjoy interacting with other people more and I'm much more extroverted when I'm around other people.

I'm also more introverted sometimes because I'm more willing and able to enjoy time alone. I'm willing to be alone with my own thoughts. I don't need other people to distract me from my own thoughts, and I can actually recharge on my own rather than just make myself miserable.

So it all depends on what I'm thinking. It's not a kind of person that I just am. So that is the bottom line. I always want you to choose on purpose what kind of person you are. And sometimes that totally includes embracing things about your current thought patterns.

So for instance, I do not like giant crowds like sports games or music festivals. I have no problem with this preference. I don't want to change it, I don't feel like I'm missing out on anything in life, but I know it's created by my thoughts about those experiences.

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I also find coaching fascinating and I find sports not fascinating. That's not because I'm a certain kind of person. It's because of my thoughts about it. And right now, I don't want to change those, but I don't know, if I fall in love with a sports nut maybe I would want to change them.

It's so freeing to me and so useful to know that if I ever wanted to, I could totally become fascinated by sports. It's all about making the conscious choice. I will always advocate that you choose who you want to be on purpose, rather than deciding that your unmanaged mind means you always have to be a certain way.

So we created a great podcast workbook for this episode that helps you think through which personality types you use to explain yourself and how they might be holding you back and how you want to shift them. And that's available in The Clutch, so every week on Fridays we send Clutch members a podcast bonus pack that has the podcast workbook for the week with questions to answer and discussion questions and then - because you can discuss in the Facebook group with your little Clutch chicken friends, and then the bonus listener Q&A episode for the week.

So those go out on Fridays so if you're listening to this on Thursday, May 2nd, you can still sign up for The Clutch today and you will get the podcast bonus pack tomorrow, May 3rd, with the workbook for this episode. And next week's episode is all about curiosity versus judgment, which I think is the most crucial distinction in thought work.

So I'm going to teach you all about that on the podcast next week and the workbook discussion guide for that is going to be amazing. So you don't want to miss that. So come sign up, hang out in The Clutch. I cannot tell you guys how fun it is in there.

It's just all of you chickens are doing such amazing work and supporting each other and helping each other with thought work about anything and

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everything and learning so much from all the bonus resources and I really just feel like I've created this - well, you guys are creating it. I'm just facilitating this really world-changing community.

I feel like this shit is going to change the world. So, come hang out with us there. We're having a great time. We're learning, we're digging deep, and we are taking the podcast even deeper.

www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. I'll see you 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.