

# UFYB 81: Pain & Illness



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## UFYB 81: Pain & Illness

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 feel like I'm now just saying those two first lines the same way every time. Got like, a little habit there. I am amazing. I was just in Dallas with my mastermind and that's my group of other coaches who were trained by my teacher and who are also making at least a million dollars a year in their business.

And being with my mastermind always breaks my brain and my team, my employees are used to me coming back and always changing everything after I go to my mastermind. And I love it. I love those days, even though my brain is so tired at the end. Because the reason my brain is so tired is that I'm being challenged to think differently.

And it's such a good reminder to me of why it's so important to surround yourself with people who are ahead of where you want to be, whether that's in business or in life or in thought work. Because when we're in our ego and we're thinking we're not good enough, then we don't want to be around other people who make more money or have higher positions than us, or they're married if we're single or whatever it is.

Wherever that we think they're ahead of us, because we're constantly comparing ourselves and finding ourselves wanting. And so, we'd rather be in a group where we feel superior because that feels safe and it strokes our ego. And I definitely remember that from early on in my coaching career.

Back then, I really liked being in a group where I was one of the most successful people. But now it's totally the opposite. I always want to be towards the bottom of whatever group I'm in. I want to be around people who are making more money than me, I want to be around people who are

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managing their mind better than me, I want to be around people who are making a bigger impact than me, who are reaching more people with their teaching than me, who are helping more clients than me.

I want to be around people who are successful in every area of life where I'm still working on creating what I want. And that doesn't mean I'm not successful, but I want to be around people who are even more successful at things that I value because that is how I learn and how I grow and get inspired.

If I only hang out with people who are "behind" me, I mean, it's a made up thought and term, but if I only hung out with people who were just beginning their businesses, or weren't having a big impact yet, or whatever the thing is, I don't learn as much. So I want to be behind the pack so I can learn and grow from observing those who are out in front of me because they're an example of what is possible for me.

I'm seeing this so much in The Clutch too, that having clients who've gone through my small group coaching program there and having other coaches there is so helpful for the people who are newer to this work because it shows the newer chickens what they can't even imagine yet.

I was just talking about this with one of my clients who went through my coaching program, Unfuck Your Brain, and now she's actually - she's a coach herself so she's also a coach in The Clutch. And we were talking about how it's so hard to explain to people this element of a thought work journey, which is that you don't even know what you don't know yet.

It's like if you are on your own, or you're only hanging around people who are doing worse managing their mind than you, or who are behind you in their business, or if you're trying to find a partner and you're only hanging out with other people who are unhappy about being single, you may get to feel good about yourself sometimes, but you don't even see all the places

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you could change and grow because you don't have examples of what you can't even imagine yet.

But then suddenly if you're in a community or a group where everyone is working on it and some people have been doing it longer, it's so inspiring because you see places you didn't even realize that you could go. So I see places and ways of growing my impact and my reach and how many people I can help that I just didn't even kind of know to think about before I started spending time with people who have created bigger movements than I have.

And I see that happening in The Clutch too. Seeing places where more experienced chickens have done thought work and where they're changed their relationships or their job or their self-esteem or their sex life or whatever it is, it's so inspiring because it sort of brings up things you didn't even know you could work on.

It's just so fun, so I love creating that for my chickens and I love being a beginner chicken in my own mastermind of people who have been doing this for so long and whose businesses are so much bigger than mine. And honestly y'all, how great is it that there's always room to grow and learn? I think this is such a big shift for me from when I took everything personally and I saw everything as a reflection of my worth.

Back then, it was so important to always be the smartest or the best or know the most, but now I'm so glad that I'm not because imagine if we already knew how to do everything perfectly? Life would be so boring.

So anyway, that's my love fest about that. I think you should all - I just want you to all think about that. Where in your life can you step out of your ego and into being glad to be surrounded by people who are "ahead" of you because of what you can learn? I just think that's so powerful.

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But this is actually not the episode topic today. That was just a little bonus teaching. Here's what I'm actually going to talk to you about today. So one of the things we've been talking about a lot in The Clutch is how to use thought work to think about pain and illness. So I want to give you a taste of that conversation because I know that some of you listeners struggle with these things too, so I want to kind of teach you some tools and ways of thinking about pain and chronic illness, or acute illness.

So we tend to think of pain and illness I think, as body-based phenomenon, right? We think that they occur in the body, and that whatever we're feeling in our bodies that involves pain or illness or comes from them is just a physical sensation. Just as to happen. But that's not really true.

And I actually want you to think about the way you used to think about emotions before you discovered the podcast. You thought they just happened to you and they had to feel the way they feel. But it turned out that your feelings were physical sensations that were caused by your thoughts.

If you've been practicing what I teach on the podcast, and especially if you're in The Clutch and you did the week one lesson on processing emotion, you've learned that how you think about your emotions actually changes how they feel.

So when you resist an emotion and you think it's bad and you think it needs to go away, the emotion feels really strong and overwhelming. But when you accept that it's okay to have an emotion and that an emotion is just a physical sensation in your body that isn't scary, it's not a problem, suddenly it actually feels less physically intense.

And pain is the same way. Pain is experienced as a sensation in your body but it is mediated by the brain. And the biology and neurobiology of pain is super fascinating, and I mean, a person could have a whole podcast with

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100 episodes just on that. Maybe someday I will do a really in-depth one. But for right now, I just want you to think about the sensation of pain the same way you would think about having a feeling because your thoughts about pain have a huge impact on how much attention you pay to it and how intense it feels.

So when your body tells your brain that you're experiencing pain, it's because your body wants you to pay attention. Your body thinks something is going wrong. It wants you to fix it, and that's just like an emotion, right? When your lizard brain thinks there's a threat, it starts yelling.

When your body thinks you may be damaging it or hurting it, it starts yelling. Pain is that yelling. Your body is telling you that something might be going wrong. But it's not just like a telegram from your body to your brain that your brain just objectively reads.

Your brain actually has to interpret those sensations and in addition to that level of it happening, you even have thoughts about the sensations. So if you're choosing the pain, you will not find it as painful as if you aren't choosing the pain. If you're somebody who gets their body hair waxed, it may feel painful, but imagine what your response would be if somebody did that to you without warning or consent?

Or, say you're a runner or a weight lifter. You do some kind of exercise where you know that your left knee hurts a little bit when you do it, but there's no problem there. You don't think it's a problem, you've had it checked, you don't think it's a big deal. You just know it happens when you do a long run or you lift a particularly heavy weight or whatever.

And because your brain categorizes that as no big deal, it doesn't bother you that much and you don't think about it that much. That's not because it's somehow objectively a lower level of pain, or below a certain threshold.

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It's because of the way your brain is categorizing the pain and deciding what to think about it.

I think about this a lot because I know a woman who's an ultramarathon runner. She's one of the top two in the world actually, and one of the things I think about is she just must have a totally different relationship to physical pain than I do. I know that she's run races with hurt feet or she broke her arm or her wrist recently while running a race and still finished it.

Obviously, it's not that she just doesn't feel any pain while running 100 miles at a time. But it's how she thinks about the physical sensations she's having that makes it bearable for her. Or you think about people who have masochistic tendencies in their sexuality, who experience pain as pleasurable.

Those people don't experience all pain as pleasurable. It's not like if you punch a masochist in the face without warning they're going to find that sexually arousing. Pain that they welcome receiving in a sexual context where they've agreed to it and their brain knows to expect it and what to think about it feels very different from the same sensations if they were unexpected and not consensual.

And again, you don't have to be a masochist to understand this. Think about working out or a waxing. Any kind of physically painful experience that you choose on purpose. So how we think about pain and illness makes a big difference in our experience of it, and I am personally really fascinated by this because I have hypermobile joints and loose ligaments.

So my sacrum and many of my other joints are often out of alignment, and that creates some pain and strain. And I should also just say, I love all of you and please do not send me your recommendations about this. I have seen lots of different providers; I have a routine that works for me. I don't

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need any additional suggestions, although I love you for wanting to make them.

So, the point is I used to experience this pain or these physical sensations as being a big problem and as being very physically intense, and like, very distracting. Like my brain could just only focus on the pain. But when I discovered thought work, I started getting curious about what my thoughts about pain were, and I discovered that I was having thoughts like, "Something's wrong with me. My body is broken. I shouldn't feel this way. My life would be better if my body were different. My body is a problem. My body is holding me back. My body is working against me."

And one thing that I immediately noticed was interesting was that these were the same thoughts I had about my body and how it looked before I did all the body image work on myself. So my brain was telling me that these were true thoughts and that they were specific to this pain and this physical condition, but they totally weren't. They were just the same old bullshit that I had been thinking before.

In other words, I'm not good enough, something is wrong, and I'd be happier if it were different. And those three thoughts show up in so many areas of our lives. But all those thoughts are making me both resistant to and hyperaware of the pain.

I was resisting it because I didn't want it to be there. So whenever I experienced the sensations that my brain categorized as pain, I would have all these negative thoughts about it. It was just more evidence for those negative thoughts. And then at the same time because I was resistant to those thoughts and the pain, I became hyper-sensitized to them.

I basically had turned them into a danger in my brain, and then I was hyper-vigilant. I was always on the lookout for that danger, because that's what



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lizard brain does. So all of that was just reinforcing the neural circuit of the pain and the thoughts about what I made it mean.

And what's so fascinating about pain is that it can be a learned mental response, just like a thought and feelings cycle. Your brain literally learns the pain pattern and then keeps recreating it, even if there's nothing physically wrong with you.

I was actually talking to a friend recently. I was out in the Bay area and she works with horses, and she was talking about how she has this horse who has an injury and - he used to have an injury, I should say. He's healed now. But she has to retrain him really slowly because although he now can physically do what he used to do, he doesn't know that and he thinks he's still having pain.

He still reacts the way horses react to pain. So she has to retrain the horse to teach its brain that it actually can do the movements without pain now. So the animal has the memory of the pain. It thinks that it's still having pain, and its brain recreates the pain the best we can tell, even though the physical problem has resolved.

The horse is still exhibiting a pain response from doing those movements, and so she has to teach it tiny bit by tiny bit that it actually is fine. And this is not limited to horses. This happens with people too, and there's actually an app called Curable that I have not used it extensively myself so I'm not recommending it as like, it's Kara approved, but I do know several people who have had a great experience with it.

And what's interesting about it is that it's an app that is meant to help you reduce chronic pain. It started focusing on migraines, but it works for any kind of chronic pain. And it essentially uses tools to retrain your brain to reduce those pain responses. So it's like, Unfuck Your Brain, but for pain.

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Another fascinating example I think is phantom limb pain. So, phantom limb pain is when a person has a limb amputated, but they still feel pain in that limb that is no longer there. Now, how is that possible? It's possible because the brain has a mental map of the limb, and it has learned the habit of signaling and creating pain there.

And now the brain is doing that without the limb being there at all, which is so wild. Really think about it. You can feel pain in a limb you don't even have because your brain is used to the feeling of pain and having that limb, and it recreates that experience for you.

And I think back pain in particular, which is what I've experienced is notorious for having very little relationship often to structural problems. Now, it's not phantom limb, obviously. But people who have complained of back pain for years will be found to have no structural problem in their spine sometimes, and meanwhile, people who have lots of problems in their spine, you find out after death or an autopsy or imaging for something else may report no pain at all.

Now, I actually knew someone who had a bike accident and then they had debilitating pain that got worse and worse for years. They couldn't sleep in a bed, they couldn't sit still for long. Every experience with them had to do with their back and how they had to move around and where you could go and where you could sit.

Their life was totally constrained by the pain. So eventually they went to a pain specialist. It was like, the last step before surgery, and the pain specialist told them there's no structural problem here. There's nothing wrong with your back, so you're going to have to learn to live with this pain. We can't do surgery because there's nothing wrong here that we can see, so you're going to have to learn to manage it.

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And I swear, I witnessed this with my own eyes. Within a few weeks, their pain was totally gone and their life went back to normal. It was wild. So I'm not saying pain is just in your head and if you just think you don't have it, then you won't. That's not what I'm saying.

What I am saying is that your experience of pain and other physical limitations is hugely impacted by your thoughts about it. So if we can do something about some of it, we might as well try. Sometimes your brain is creating the pain with no physical impairment or problem even there.

And sometimes that's because you used to have a structural problem, you used to have a problem there, there used to be an illness or an injury. But it's physically healed, but the pain response is still there. Or it may be that there was never really anything structurally wrong and it's an emotional expression. There's a lot of different reasons people feel pain.

And sometimes there may be a physical problem still, but your thoughts about what the pain means and your resistance to the pain, and the story you tell about the pain all impacts your experience of the pain. And it's just so crucial to understand not just emotionally, but physically, the pain will feel physically less intense when you do the thought work usually around what you're making the pain mean and how you are kind of recreating it or scanning for it or focusing on it all the time.

So, if you experience chronic pain, or even if you're just experiencing temporary acute pain, it will be so powerful to bring awareness to what you're thinking about it and to change those thoughts on purpose. And I find that one of the most common sets of thoughts are - I think earlier I said I had the one - there's something wrong with me, but a lot of the suffering I find around pain and illness my clients have is that they're projecting out into the future, that it's always going to be like this.

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And of course, the only reason that's a problem is because of what we make it mean, but even just with an acute illness, noticing that how much your brain wants to like, forecast this into the future, even just that can really help reduce it.

So at a minimum, you will resolve some of your emotional suffering, but you may even be able to reduce or eliminate the physical pain itself once you stop believing that it means something is going wrong. So if this topic is kind of important or of interest to you, a couple of resources.

Number one, that app Curable that I mentioned you can find on your phone. Number two, the podcast Invisibilia had a really great episode on pain recently that I really recommend listening to. It's about how the brain gets overly sensitized and hyper vigilant about pain. And about how physical pain can be kind of a substitute for inability to process emotion.

So that is really great. And then number three is if you're listening to this on the day it came out, the podcast workbook that will have some prompts and questions and exercise to take you deeper into your thoughts about any pain or physical injury or illness you're having, that gets sent out to Clutch members tomorrow on Friday.

So if you join The Clutch today, [www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch), you will get that podcast bonus pack tomorrow. It'll have the podcast workbook. It'll have the bonus listener Q&A podcast that only go out to Clutch members, and plus, you get access to all the rest of the amazing stuff in The Clutch.

The five-week intro course that teaches you the *Unfuck Your Brain* coaching model, all the bonus resources, the amazing community, The Clutch coaches, it's so much good stuff. I can't list it all. You've got to check out the website. [www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch).

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And then next week the podcast is going to be about creating and generating positive emotion, and that's what we're going to be working on in The Clutch, which is going to be amazing. So hustle on over, hop on over. What do chickens do? Wander on over. Cluck on over. [www.ununfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch](http://www.ununfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). Join us. You get access to all that great stuff and can take your learning so much deeper. See you guys 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.karaloewentheil.com/podcastconfidence](http://www.karaloewentheil.com/podcastconfidence).