

UFYB 83: The Thought Ladder and Thinking V. Believing



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB 83: The Thought Ladder and Thinking V. Believing

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 think I've started to say how are you all the same way every time too. I'm always trying to think of a new way to open the podcast but then it's just like, habit. I see the mic and my mouth opens and that's what comes out.

So we have been working a lot in The Clutch on how to change your thoughts, obviously one of the biggest things that we are working on. And so I decided that for all of us, you guys included, it was high time to revisit one of the most powerful tools I teach for changing your thought, and that is called the thought ladder.

And if you are in The Clutch, you should still listen to this podcast because it's going to help you, and if you are not in The Clutch, you know what I think about that. You should come hang out with us. But whether you're in it or not, this tool is super important for learning how to change your thoughts.

And I actually touched on this tool in an early episode of the podcast, so some of you may remember that. It was back when it was aimed just at lawyers, but it has become such an important part of my teaching that I think that it deserves its own updated episode and how I teach it has changed.

One of the things I really love about this work so much is that as I coach more and more and I learn new tools and ideas, I'm always updating and advancing and refining this work. And I love that the podcast has grown along with me. So there's always something new to learn for beginner

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 83: The Thought Ladder and Thinking V. Believing

chickens, and for those of you who are more advanced, I guess like hens and roosters, there's new stuff to learn too.

So let's talk about the thought ladder. Even if you think you understand this tool, this episode is going to help you get it at a deeper level so don't skip ahead. Well, I guess you can because when this comes out there's no podcast ahead of this. But if you're listening to this in the future, I'm speaking to you from the past.

Isn't that weird, by the way? Like, I'm speaking to you from the past and I'm sort of speaking to you from the future because you haven't heard this yet. Okay, let's not go down a black hole. Alright, the thought ladder. This is what happens when I record more than one podcast in a day. I just get super chatty by the end.

So the thought ladder is a tool that we use to accomplish what is essentially the main practice of thought work, which is going from thinking one thought to thinking something else. I think there are really two main things of thought work. Like, main, main premises. One is having feelings and processing emotion, and the other is changing your thoughts.

So the thought ladder is what we use to change our thoughts. And you have all heard me talk a lot about how and why kind of so-called positive thinking doesn't work, but I need to revisit that quickly here because it will help you understand how to use the thought ladder correctly.

So there are two reasons that people fail when they try to use "positive thinking." One is that they're trying to believe something that is too positive. They don't believe it yet. Positive is the name of positive thinking. It seems like it would be a good idea. But the problem is that human brains are actually really good at lying to themselves, and that's because you can think something that you don't believe, which sounds kind of crazy.

UFYB 83: The Thought Ladder and Thinking V. Believing

But if I say to you, I want you to think the thought pink elephants rule us all in your mind. Don't say it out loud. Just think it. You can think those words in your head. You can say that to yourself, but you don't actually believe it, unless you know something I don't.

And the same is true for any overly positive thought that you're trying to believe and you don't, like, I'm worthy no matter what I do, or my body is beautiful, or I can have anything I want in life. I believe all those thoughts now after several years of thought work. Most of you probably don't.

Now, you can think those thoughts. You can say them in your mind. But if you don't believe them, you're not going to get the emotional response. Of course, that has nothing to do with whether they're true. Those three things, that you're worthy no matter what you do, that your body is beautiful, and that you can have anything you want in life, those are actually true for each and every one of you.

I know that. I believe it. But for most of you, it's too far a stretch. Most of us cannot jump from I'm a bad person to I'm worthy no matter what I do, or my body is gross to my body is beautiful. That is like, the Olympic long jump or something. I do not follow sports, as anyone who has heard one of my sports metaphors can tell.

So, let's just pretend that those made sense. That's a big leap. It's too big. The Olympic long jump is too big. You would need a vaulting pole. That's probably not the same event. Whatever. The point is people try to think thoughts they don't believe, and they don't know that they don't believe them because they don't know the difference between thinking something and believing it.

When you think something, you're just saying the sentence in your mind. When you believe it, it's because you get an emotional difference in your body from thinking the thought. And when you think a thought you don't

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 83: The Thought Ladder and Thinking V. Believing

believe, it does nothing. You don't get any relief from negative emotion, you don't generate any positive emotion, you don't even feel neutral.

And actually, what happens is sometimes you feel worse because now you have a lot of thoughts and feelings about how changing your thoughts doesn't work or you're doing it wrong, or it's pointless. So it actually makes the whole situation worse. So this is where the thought ladder comes in.

The thought ladder is a tool for helping you develop neutral or baby-step thoughts, so in this episode I call them ladder thoughts but if you've heard me talk about neutral thoughts or baby-step thoughts before, it's all the same. It's a new thought you want to practice believing, even though it may not be the ultimate thought you want to have forever.

So a neutral thought, a baby-step thought, a ladder thought, they're not the be all and end all thought necessarily that you want to believe forever. They're a thought on the way to that forever thought. So I'm going to explain how this works. The thought ladder is very simple.

And if you are in The Clutch, you get a whole workbook about this in the self-coaching course that you get when you enroll. So if you're in The Clutch, you can use your workbook if you want to be working along with this episode. If you're not in The Clutch, you just draw a ladder on a piece of paper. It does not have to be fancy. That will get you the basics. Not as in depth, but it will get you there.

So at the bottom of the ladder, you put your current thought. Now, notice I said thought. Singular. One thought per ladder. I'm looking at you, especially lawyer chickens. Lawyers in particular try to cram 13 thoughts into a sentence using semicolons. I've just noticed this. No compound thoughts. No long sentences with three commas. Make the thought as simple as possible.

UFYB 83: The Thought Ladder and Thinking V. Believing

The current thought goes at the bottom of the ladder. Now, at the top of the ladder, you put your goal thought. Your goal thought is a thought that you would like to believe. You don't believe this thought yet. That's why it goes at the top as the goal thought.

Now, some of your brains are like, I don't know what my goal thought is, it's too hard, let's just die instead. We're not going to do that. You're not going to be the turtle flipped on its back. If you're not sure what you would want to believe as your goal thought, you can ask yourself one thing, which is what is the opposite of your current thought.

So if your current thought is I'm a bad person, you can just ask yourself what would be the opposite thought. Or you can imagine someone who sort of is that kind of person that you want to be. They have the feeling you want or they have the result you want or they have the beliefs you want, they have the thing in their life you want. Whatever it is. What would they be thinking?

If your current thought is my body is gross, what is someone who likes their body thinking? You can ask it that way. It's okay if your goal thought doesn't seem super amazing. Your brain may not be ready to come up with a truly positive goal thought yet, but it will get there. And there's no real right or wrong. Honestly, your goal thought doesn't matter that much because we're just trying to give you some vague idea of what would be different, so it's okay.

Now, also please remember that you are not supposed to believe this. I know I said that but I'm going to say it again. When you think your goal thought, you will not feel better. If you feel better when you think it, then you accidentally discovered a thought you can already believe and you can stop doing the ladder and just practice that.

UFYB 83: The Thought Ladder and Thinking V. Believing

But if you're doing a ladder, usually the reason is you can't believe the goal thought. So it's not supposed to feel good. It should probably feel like nothing. Like sure, it would be nice to believe that but I don't. That's what a goal thought is. It's a thought where if I suggested it to you, you would say to me, yeah sure, it would be nice to believe that, but I don't. But my brain has all these objections, but I don't feel anything.

So you take your goal thought, whatever it is it'll do, write it at the top of the ladder. So, now what we have to do is figure out what thoughts are going to take us from the bottom, our current thought, up to the goal thought at the top of the ladder. And to do that, we need to brainstorm neutral thoughts.

Ladder thoughts are not usually super inspirational. They will not be featured on Instagram accounts on photos of people doing yoga on the beach. They will not be engraved on jewelry on Etsy. They don't make good quotes. They're not super inspirational.

They're very small steps, but they're thoughts you can believe. So in The Clutch, you get a whole workbook that gives you a lot of prompts for how to do this and I can't go through them all in the episode but I'm going to teach you a few of my favorites. So one thing to do is to attach what I call an opening phrase, like I'm open to believing, or I'm learning to believe.

So if your goal thought is I'm inherently worthy, let's say, you could practice thinking, I'm open to believing I'm inherently worthy, or I'm learning to believe I'm inherently worthy. So that's attaching an opener to the goal thought. You're like, here's the goal thought and then we just put in front of it I'm open to believing, I'm learning to believe, I'm becoming a person who does believe.

We attach an opener to the goal thought. You can also attach an opener to the current thought, like it's possible my brain is not reliable when it tells me this thought. So you could think it's possible my brain is not reliable when it

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 83: The Thought Ladder and Thinking V. Believing

tells me I'm not worthy. So that's kind of an opener you can attach to the goal thought or to the current thought.

You could also try what I call depersonalizing the thought. Our thoughts are most painful when they're about us, so if you have the thought that you're a bad mother because you yell at your kids sometimes, you may not yet be able to believe that you're a good mom. But you might be able to believe a thought like there are good mothers who yell at their kids sometimes, or a person can yell at their kids and be a good mom too.

You're making the thought be about other people who share something with you. They have something in common with you, but it's more distant than making it about yourself and your brain won't put up as many objections. I used this technique a lot when I was doing my body image and dating work on myself and I used the thought, "Some fat women find love," a lot.

It was depersonalizing it. I wasn't trying to believe that I was going to because my brain wasn't there yet, but I could totally believe that some fat women did. And then over time, your brain kind of adapts and applies that thought about other people to you almost subconsciously. So those are a couple of tools I like to use, a couple of examples, but there's no right or wrong way to come up with a ladder thought, truly.

It just needs to be slightly better than your current thought. And I really encourage you to brainstorm several any time you do a thought ladder. There isn't a right answer. Come up with a few and then read each one and see which one feels best to you. And so important, you have to remember, best may just be feeling like nothing.

Like, feeling neutral. Or it might even just be feeling like bad but not quite as bad. Like especially with anxiety, sometimes a neutral thought will just feel like oh, my anxiety went from an eight to a four on a scale of one to 10.

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 83: The Thought Ladder and Thinking V. Believing

That's still good. A four is better than eight. That's the whole point of a ladder thought.

It doesn't do you any good to be like, wishing and looking for a thought that will magically solve all your feelings when you're not ready for that. It's much better to practice a thought that improves things a little bit and over time, it will get better and better.

So just going for feeling a tiny bit better, even just a slight lessening of feeling bad. It's not supposed to feel amazing. Once you pick a thought, you need to practice it. So if you're in The Clutch, make sure you check out the list in the Facebook group of ways to practice new thoughts that came in your lesson with it.

If you're not, one of the things I recommend is an app called Think Up, which is like, an app for your phone that you can program to remind you to think certain thoughts. You can also just set an alarm on your phone if you don't want to get fancy. You can put sticky notes around the house. Anything you can do to remind yourself to think the thought.

And then you need to practice, practice, practice. The biggest question I get about thought ladders usually is how do I know when I'm ready to go to the next rung on the ladder, or to practice the goal thought. And there's no right or wrong to this but I think kind of once you're thinking the new thought, the ladder thought that you chose, once you're sort of thinking that naturally, like you don't have to practice it all the time, it just comes up on its own, then you can move to the next rung of the ladder, or you might be ready for the goal thought.

One of the things that I find interesting about the thought ladder is that I usually - let's say I brainstorm five different ladder thoughts. So it's like, there's lots of rungs on my ladder. I don't usually have to go through them

UFYB 83: The Thought Ladder and Thinking V. Believing

all. Usually if I practice one until it's natural or maybe even two, my brain kind of like, makes the jump the rest of the way on its own.

So, sometimes that happens, sometimes not. Sometimes you do have to go through many iterations. And the other fascinating thing, if you're more advanced at this work, is that sometimes you'll get to your goal thought and be like, oh, I now can see an even better thought about this. So now what was my goal thought now becomes my current thought and I want to set a new goal thought, all on the same issue.

So it's like you're going from - if your thought is I am a terrible person, and you're just trying to get to I'm an okay person, like I'm an okay person is your goal thought, you might get there and then be like, oh, now I'm an okay person is my current thought and now I want a new goal thought of I'm an amazing person, and now I'm going to do this exercise all over again.

So you're like, always as we evolve and as we learn to love ourselves more, we see these horizons that we couldn't even see in the beginning. We had to start a whole new ladder. And you can always just check in with yourself by practicing thinking the goal thought and seeing how you feel.

Your body is always the guide. So you always just check back in with your body. Alright, so that is the thought ladder and it is a super effective tool for incremental thought change work, which I think is really the magic. It's not like, revolution overnight. It's not transformation immediately. I just don't believe that shit really exists. It really is a daily grind sometimes, especially in the beginning, but that's okay.

Your brain is grinding away anyway, making you feel terrible. It's like when my clients say, "Thought work is hard." I'm like, yeah, well thinking shitty thoughts about yourself your whole life is also hard. Might as well put the effort into something that's going to make us feel better.

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 83: The Thought Ladder and Thinking V. Believing

So, that is the thought ladder and I don't know if real chickens like ladders. I think they possibly do not, but my chickens should love the ladder because it really is one of the most powerful tools we have. And if this intrigued you and you want to learn more, we obviously work on thought ladders and practicing new thoughts a lot in The Clutch, and that's what our Clutch only webinar and life coaching call is going to be about in June.

So come join us. www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. And if you are listening to this on the day that it was released and you join today, you will get a bonus thought ladder workbook with your podcast bonus pack tomorrow. So good.

Alright y'all, I will talk to you next week. Ladder, ladder, ladder until then.

If you're loving what you're hearing in these podcasts, you have got to come check out The Clutch. The online podcast community for all things *Unfuck Your Brain*. I'm there, I have coaches there, all of your fellow chickens are there. We are taking thought work deeper, we are learning how to apply it to our own lives, we are having so much fun.

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