

UFYB 89: How to Increase Your Productivity



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 having one of those days that just flows so perfectly. I'm telling you this for a reason, not just to make you jealous because I'm going to teach you how to do it.

I got up this morning, I went for a run, I had a meeting with my team, I did a six-month review with one of my employees, I recorded a podcast interview from the Million Dollar Badass podcast with the awesome Rachel Rodgers. I even got my hair done, now I'm recording this for you, and it all ran perfectly even though the podcast taping was delayed by half an hour and my appointment was late too, but I still have gotten everything done on time.

So why am I telling you all this? I'm not just gloating. I'm not just boasting. It's because I have managed to stay on track with my productivity and even make up time to account for the delays, and that's because I understand what creates productivity. There is a secret to productivity and it's incredibly simple and yet no one wants to do it.

So I'm going to teach it to you today. Before I get into this, in an earlier episode of this podcast, I taught you how to organize your workflow and calendar. That's called Getting Shit Done, and I definitely recommend that you listen to that if you haven't already. You don't have to.

You can totally still get something out of this podcast if you don't, but I just think they're more powerful when used together because this episode is going to talk about distraction and focusing, but if you don't have an organizational system for your work and calendar, then you have a bigger problem you have to solve before you even have the ability to try to focus.

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So assuming you do have a system but you aren't getting as much done as you want, it's because you aren't being as productive as you could be, or you're having perfectionist fantasies about everything you can get done, and I'm going to address that in a podcast later this month. Right now, we're talking about focusing.

So here's the thing about not being productive or as productive as you want. This is not a moral issue. It's not a character flaw. I think in our society, between the Puritan influences in America and capitalism, we think productivity, it's like the old saying of cleanliness is next to godliness. We think productivity is next to godliness, even if we don't believe in god.

We think it is a moral imperative. It's not. It's an optional value. And lack of productivity is also not a moral issue. It's actually a completely natural result of the conditions that I'm going to describe in this episode. So the reason we have so many books and podcasts and courses about productivity is that the real solution to productivity feels terrible and so none of us want to do it.

The real answer is focusing. I'm going to teach you how. I'm not saying you should already know. Most of us don't know how to focus. Your lizard brain does not like to focus. It wants to constantly scan the environment for pleasure or pain. It's always asking, is there something to eat? Is there someone to have sex with? Is there something that might kill me? Is there something that's all three of those things?

It's always scanning around looking for anything different or out of place or changed that might alert it to something to eat or something to have sex with, or something that might kill you. That's what your primitive brain is always asking. So ingredient one, we have a brain that's always scanning for anything different or new or distracting or changing.

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Then ingredient two, your prefrontal cortex, which could help you focus is usually busy thinking mean thoughts about your abilities and performance. This is something I cover in depth in the very first episode of the podcast, even before it was called *Unf*ck Your Brain*, about procrastination. But you can scroll all the way back in the feed. It's called pre-Unf*ck Your Brain, number one.

So the short version is you don't want to focus using the part of your brain that can focus because you know subconsciously that's going to entail thinking all these negative thoughts about yourself and have all the feelings that go along with them, so you don't really want to do the thing that you're trying to focus on anyway.

So already we have an uphill battle. We have a primitive part of your brain that just wants to always look for a reason to be distracted and look around and see if anything's changed and check again and check again. And then the prefrontal, more developed part of your brain that could help you focus on more substantive concepts or hard work is also the part of your brain that's being super mean and critical to you.

And so you don't really want to be alone with that part of your brain either. It's one of the reasons we do thought work on all of our self-critical thinking. And then third, you factor in that we are using technology most of us that is literally designed to make it impossible for us to focus. And you heard that right. Your software, your computer, your phone are designed to make it difficult for you to pay attention to anything.

So remember, I said your brain evolved to be constantly scanning for food or sex or danger. Your phone is designed to mimic all the things that your brain pays attention to in nature. Color, pattern, sound, movement, vibration. This is not an accident. The more time you spend on your phone, the more money you spend on your phone.

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The more your phone is a daily part of your life, the more you will spend money on the actual phone, on buying things off the phone, on buying apps, or just looking at things where advertisers can sell you stuff.

Instagram is free. The more you look at Instagram, the more you'll see advertisers as they're hoping eventually, you'll buy.

Apps and games are designed to drip out dopamine in patterns that are specifically put together to keep you coming back for more. So hardware companies, software companies, advertisers, they're all trying to make the product as addictive as possible. The more you scroll, the more you spend either directly or indirectly.

The same is true of your computer. More and more, especially as we start to use applications that work across multiple platforms, so we have Gmail, we have Slack, we have all these other chat platforms or Facebook or Instagram, we use them on multiple platforms and so they're with us all the time. All of those brightly colored badges and pings and rings and flashing notifications, those are all designed to keep you hooked on the dopamine hit of getting something new.

So again, your brain is curious. If it sees a box, it wants to know what's inside. There might be food or sex or danger inside. That's pretty much how you see your email too. There's either going to be like, someone saying something nice about you or reaching out to you or validating you, or there might be something dangerous. Someone criticizing you or wanting something you don't know how to do.

It's positive or negative. You're looking for pleasure or trying to avoid pain and scared about it. And modern life, especially if you have a desk job is essentially an all-day everyday electronic orchestra of rings and dings and pings and flashes and vibrations that keep your brain constantly distracted and looking for the next stimulation.

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And when you're already disinclined to focus on something because you have thoughts about your own ability to do it or you're thinking about all the other things you have to do, you are so willing to be distracted. So there truly is no way to be productive when you are responding to all the stimuli your phone and computer want to offer you.

So this is what you have to do. You have to turn all that shit off. Seriously. Turn it off. I want you to notice right now how resistant you feel to me saying that. You do not want to turn it off. In fact, now that you're thinking about it, you want to check it right now. You want to pause this podcast and hop on Instagram real quick, or even better, you want to do both at once.

Because of all these electronics, we have all gotten used to what we call multitasking. I'm saying it that way, what we call multitasking because it's not really multitasking because multitasking is a lie. It is a complete lie. You cannot do more than one thing that requires mental attention at the same time.

You can do more than one thing at a time if one activity is governed by the part of your brain that encoded repeated action sequences that can operate subconsciously once they've been learned. So you can - we've all been able to drive somewhere if we know the route really well without paying attention to it. You've done that so often that your brain can subconsciously do it now.

It's the same with walking. You can walk and talk at the same time. You can do the dishes while you're thinking about something other than the dishes because you've done them so many times. You can't drive somewhere new, trying to pay attention to directions and also thinking about something else all at the same time.

We've all had that - if I'm driving and I'm trying to deal with new directions and I might have crossed four lanes of traffic and I'm not sure where I'm

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going, I don't want someone else talking to me about something complicated at the same time. I can't think about both.

You can't write one thing while you're thinking about another. Not well for sure. And think about if your mind drifts while you're reading, you have to re-read it. You didn't absorb any of the information because your brain was otherwise engaged. You were just doing the automatic behavior of scanning words with your eyes, but the interpretive part of your brain that does the thinking was doing something else, so you didn't retain any information.

Multitasking is just a pernicious lie. Many of us will try to let's say write an email while on a conference call. We don't try to write an email and send a text at the same time because we need our thumbs for both, but we'll try to do one and then the other, or write half the email and then send a text and then go back. But studies show that switching rapidly between different tasks is actually just as bad as trying to multitask.

And I think when most of us talk about multitasking, that's really what we need. We mean switching around a bunch of things or trying to work with the TV on. When you switch from one task to another, the time you lose in getting back to the original task can be anywhere from 20 minutes to three hours, and you do this dozens of times a day.

So repeat it with me. Multitasking is a lie, and switching between different screens and apps and tasks in rapid succession is damaging to your productivity. It's also damaging to your brain. It impairs concentration and damages your short-term memory, among other things. So if you want to increase your productivity and not ruin your brain, you have to learn to focus.

And the way we learn how to focus is that we do it for short periods of time and build up. So you might start with 10 minutes of working on one task

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and shutting off all notifications and work your way up from there. That means you have to exit your email, exit Slack, mute your phone, put it across the room where you can't see it, or even better, turn it off entirely and put it in a drawer. Even just seeing it will make your brain want to check it.

Silence your computer so you don't get any notifications. Exit all software other than the thing you're working on. And if possible, do what you're working on not on a computer. I do type long things on a computer, even just podcast notes, but if I'm planning an event or coaching concept or outlining a new program or something, I will actually do that on paper when I can so that I'm not even looking at a screen.

Regardless, however you can do it, you close out everything else and you work on one thing for 10 minutes. I picked 10 minutes because I know some of you have thoughts that you have to be immediately available for anything at all times. Well listen to me, unless you're a trauma surgeon in an emergency room, that is not actually true. That is a thought you have.

Everyone can shut their notifications off for 10 minutes. I have to warn you, for some of you, this is going to be excruciating. You are going to be itching to check your phone immediately. The minute your brain has to actually think about something challenging, it's going to whisper, hey, maybe that person on Tinder has messaged you back.

Most of us are completely habituated to checking our phone. Any moment that our hands are idle in the elevator, walking on the street, waiting for food in a restaurant, or any time that we have to think about something or we're having a feeling and we don't want to do one of those two things. So this is going to be like learning to stop smoking or drink less or stop emotional eating for some of you.

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Not for everyone. It's really - there's a gradation, but I'm not telling you this to scare you off. You totally can do it. I'm going to teach you a little bit more about how in a minute. But I'm telling you this because it is going to be very intense for some of you and that's good to know going in so that you don't expect it to be easy and you don't shame yourself if it isn't or think that something's gone wrong.

These devices have been designed to be addictive for you. That doesn't mean that you can't be in charge of the relationship. You can. But like any dopamine dependent habit, you have to expect it will feel uncomfortable not to answer the urge. You're habituated.

So here's what you do when you get the urge to check your phone or email during your 10 minutes of focused work time. You allow the urge to be there in your body and you don't act on it. Don't resist or white-knuckle it. Don't try to fight it off. Just like an emotion, you want to allow it and get curious about it. What does it feel like in your body? Where is it? Hot or cold? Fast or slow? Expanding or contracting?

What does it feel like to have an urge and not answer it? Learning to allow urges without acting on them is incredibly powerful work and it can apply to any dopamine driven habit you have. I'll talk about that more in some podcast later this month.

So as you get better at it, you can work up. You can go to 15 minutes, 20 minutes, 30 minutes, a whole hour. The best days I have productivity wise are the days that start the night before when I turn off my phone before I go to bed, and then that day I don't turn it back on or log into my computer until 1pm or 2pm. And I get an insane amount of thinking and creating done on those days.

It's not going to be feasible for all of you but you can all start with 10 minutes and work your way up. I actually had a client on *Unf*ck Your Brain*

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recently, I think I might have talked about her in a recent podcast. But she had a high-level executive job and when she came to me, she had thousands of emails in her inbox and literally no time on her calendar to do any work.

She was in meetings or she was in her email all day. She had all of her notifications on all the time. She responded to email immediately, her door was always open. So she was interrupted literally every minute she was in the office by something on her computer or a person. We started with her turning off her email notification and closing her door for one hour a day and working on actual substantive work during that hour, and then she would spend an hour responding to email.

And this I cover in the Getting Shit Done podcast where you need to get specific about what you're going to do in each block of time and you've got to save time for your email and your Slack and whatever to process all those notifications. Within a few weeks, she fought me tooth and nail. I'm sure she will not be upset to hear me say.

But within a few weeks, she was getting down to inbox zero at the end of every day and she's getting more substantive work done than she has in years. All of these apps and email and social media, what they all have in common is that they can be totally useful or enjoyable and that's fine too, but they need to be done one at a time on purpose and not just constantly checked whenever you get pinged.

So I am not saying you should never check social media, you should never look at your phone, you should never play a game. What I'm saying is you want those choices to be intentional. So The Clutch has a Facebook group. I obviously don't think that Facebook is inherently terrible for you to use, but I would never recommend that someone try to be writing a brief and participating in The Clutch and listening to music and texting people and have the TV on.

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You can't do all those things at once. You would be much better off scheduling half an hour to scroll Instagram or scheduling a half an hour to participate in Clutch conversations and then scheduling an hour to watch Netflix to relax and scheduling two hours to work on this project and doing each thing separately.

When you try to do everything at once and you bounce back and forth, everything takes longer and it doesn't feel rewarding, and the quality is lower. So there's just no benefit to trying to do it all at once or jumping back and forth and responding to all those notifications. You want to set aside time to go through your email, set aside time to do your Slack notifications. Set aside time, yes, to hang out on Instagram or watch Netflix or whatever it is, participate in The Clutch, but do it on purpose and don't try to do them all at once.

You do not need to get certified in scrum to get more done. You need to turn off everything that is trying to distract you, everything that wants to make money off your attention because if you learn how to tolerate the discomfort of focusing and not answering the urge to distract yourself, that's how you'll get to be the one who makes money off your own attention rather than giving it away to somebody else who's profiting off of it and you get nothing.

So if you struggle with productivity and multitasking, then today is the day to join The Clutch because this week's podcast workbook is going to walk you through setting goals for this process and evaluating your progress and dealing with those urges. So if you're listening to this the day it comes out, it's July 11th. So if you sign up for The Clutch today you will get that workbook tomorrow.

It's unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. Go forth. Turn everything off and be productive, my chickens. If you're in The Clutch, I'll talk to you tomorrow in

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your bonus podcast, and if you're not, I'll talk to you next week. See y'all then.

If you're loving what you're learning in the podcast, you have got to come check out The Clutch. The Clutch is the podcast community for all things *Unf*ck Your Brain*. It's where you can get individual help applying the concepts to your own life.

It's where you can learn new coaching tools not shared on the podcast that will blow your mind even more, and it's where you can hang out and connect over all things thought work with other podcast chickens just like you and me. It's my favorite place on earth and it will change your life, I guarantee it. Come join us at www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. It's unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. I can't wait to see you there.