

UFYB 92: Numbing + Compulsive Behavior Vol. 2



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 rock star, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

In this episode, I am teaching about behaviors that we use to numb out and that can feel compulsive to us. I am not talking about compulsive behaviors in a clinical sense, and if you have clinically compulsive behavioral problems that pose a danger to you or others, you should consult professional mental health treatment.

Hello my chickens. How are all of you chickens? Someone in The Clutch posted this link to photos of beautiful chickens and now I think of all of you as all these exotic beautiful varieties of chickens.

So I am doing amazing. I have to tell you, I'm going to tell you why. I was a little burned out the last day or two, that is a feeling created by my thoughts. I was not doing what my friend and fantastic coach Susan Hyatt calls staying in the miracle. You know me. I'm not like a miracle kind of girl, but to me that just means like, staying in the wonder, staying in the gratitude.

I was not doing that. I wasn't like, having a lot of negative self-talk or a ton of complaining, but I just was kind of like, on autopilot like, well, this is just doing my life and I have to answer these emails and write these podcasts and whatever.

Then one of my clients posted in our group, in our community and said, "I fully accepted that I can tolerate any feeling. This is huge for me because I used to panic when I felt severe self-loathing and despair because I thought it was a feeling that could hurt me. But I realized this is only true if I act on it. I've not decided that I'll never act on it but just sit with it in compassion for myself and it's lost its scariness and power. My other

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thought work has also made it much less common. I now intervene too early to get that far into negative self-talk."

What I love about this is number one, that willingness to feel any feeling is truly everything. Number two, when I started as a coach and when you start as a coach, obviously everybody has their own little ego and you sort of - you want to believe or you believe that you as the coach are the person who's making the difference.

And what I've really come to see is that it has nothing to do with me. I am just the vehicle for this teaching. I am just the person who's communicating it in the way that my particular clients can hear and understand, and that all the change they create is for themselves, with their own and your own bravery and willingness to practice and willingness to be uncomfortable and willingness to invest in yourself with your time and your energy and your resources. Your willingness to turn off Netflix or get coaching even if your mom thinks it's weird or whatever it is.

That is what's so powerful and so transformative and while I think when I was a baby coach I sort of wanted to be the one who helps people, and of course I'm still driven by the desire to serve and to teach all of you, that's why this podcast exists, it's really because I know that you are all capable of learning how to help yourselves, and that's what is so powerful.

This particular client I have never even coached her directly. I've taught her. I needed someone to teach me these tools and you all need someone to teach you these tools. We are not taught them in first grade like we should be, so I'm not saying - of course I believe that people need coaches. You need a coach to teach you what you don't know and show you your blind spots.

But it's really you who's able to transform your own life. That's what's so powerful. I think my clients when I was doing *Unf*ck Your Brain*, which is

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my six-month coaching program, as we would get towards the end, I would basically stop feeding them the answers and start making them really answer their own questions and I think that some of them hated me for that.

But that's my goal. I want you - whether you're just listening to the podcast or you are a member of The Clutch, or you are working intensively with me in a master class or at a live event, whatever our relationship is, I want you to be learning how to coach and take care of yourself. I don't want everybody to need to text me for help because that's too many people texting me. I don't like texting that much.

I want you to be able to use these tools to help yourself so that you know you can rely on yourself and that's what's so powerful to me about this client's victory and realization is that she did that work, she took what I taught her but she is relying on herself that she will never act on that self-loathing and that despair, but that she is just going to sit with it in compassion for herself.

So powerful. And that really relates to the reason that I wanted to read that on this episode is that it relates to what we're going to talk about today. And which is the ability to sit with discomfort or even emotions that feel scary and not to panic and not to freak out and to be able to experience that.

So that's what I really want to talk about today. And if you have not listened to volume one of this two-piece podcast, volume one was released last week, it's got that same similar name, Numbing and Compulsive Behavior Vol 1. This is volume two. Go back and listen to volume one. You really need volume one before you're ready for volume two.

I didn't name them that way for no reason, so go listen to number one. Now, I know that compulsive behavior is a strong word, but I'm using that because I really want to normalize it. Most of us have some kind of numbing behavior that we engage in that we do without really noticing it

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and against our own will, and that we would feel anxious about not having access to.

We all have some compulsive tendencies because we create these habitual loops where we've set up a neural circuit that gives us a reward of dopamine every time we activate it, and then every time it gets stronger and stronger. And talking about it is how we dispel the shame.

So in the last episode, in volume one, I really taught you all about what creates those behaviors and why we have them and why we develop them and how to pay attention to them and start to learn about them. And today I'm going to teach you how to actually work on changing any of them that you want to change.

So there's two different tools, and I really recommend using them together to get the most out of them, but you can use them on their own also. It's up to you. So first is planning and the second is allowing urges. They're both pretty straightforwardly named but I'm going to explain what each of them mean and how to use them.

So planning is sort of what it sounds like but also probably not what you'd expect because when you hear that, you probably think this means making a plan to not do the thing that you're trying to stop doing. And it might mean that but it also can mean making a plan to do the thing at predetermined times and in predetermined amounts.

So if you're trying to drink less, you would plan how much to drink, when, where, what you're going to drink, you would make a really specific plan. And that might seem like it's straightforward if you're just trying to drink less but not stop, but I also recommend this even for behavior that you think you want to stop doing altogether.

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If you're trying to stop biting your nails, then plan when you're going to do it. Right now, you do it unconsciously, automatically, all the time. We're going to plan for when you're going to do it. What time, where will you be, how long will you bite them? If you're trying to stop bingeing, plan your binge 24 hours ahead of time. What are you going to eat? Where will you be? How much are you going to be? When, where, how much, all of it.

Because here's the thing; I know for some of you, you're thinking well, that's crazy, I'm trying to stop doing this thing, why would I plan to do it more? But trying to stop cold turkey hasn't worked, right? If you're listening to this podcast, then that has not worked. You've tried that, and one reason it hasn't worked is that you try to go from doing it all the time to not doing it at all, and you tried to operate based on willpower, and then eventually your willpower breaks down or you rebel against the new rule and you do the thing, you get the dopamine hit, you just reinforced that cycle.

Then you feel bad about it and you want to do it some more to get away from feeling bad about it. When you have this kind of numbing behavior, you're usually doing it in times of emotional distress. It's a coping mechanism that you use when you're feeling bad, and sometimes it's like, very intense feeling bad and you're aware of it, and sometimes it's really not.

Especially with things like nail biting, hair pulling, kind of small over-grooming habits I find especially people often are doing totally unconsciously when they unconsciously have a thought that stresses them out and then they take this unconscious action to numb from it, like they don't know any of that's going on.

The whole power of it is that you're able to use it unconsciously, so you don't really have to pay attention to what's happening. It's a lot less fun when you plan it out ahead of time. So if you pull your hair for instance, plan on when you'll pull it and how much and for how long. Nail biting,

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whatever it is. Watching porn, watching Netflix, drinking, eating. Make the plan 24 hours ahead of time.

When you use your prefrontal cortex, that's the part of your brain that can plan, to decide ahead of time what you'll drink or whatever, how much of it, where you'll be, what you'll be doing, you really decrease that impulsive fun of it and you decrease that sort of reward you get from doing it unconsciously.

It also really short-circuits I think the argument that your brain uses against you that it's too hard to never do it. If you do it at all, the whole thing's over, so you might as well do it forever with no control over it at all. Your numbing habits happen automatically without you paying attention or even making conscious decisions a lot of the time.

When you create a plan, you are taking the behavior from automatic to purposeful, from unconscious to conscious. And it allows you to see when you want to go off the plan, which is where all of the good information is. Because of course that will happen. A plan is not magic. Making a plan does not change your brain overnight.

Making a plan is what allows you to bring the activity conscious, to your prefrontal cortex, to do it on purpose, to plan it on purpose, and the plan is what allows you to see and start to pay attention to all the times you want to go off your plan. And negative emotion is going to come up, or a habitual urge is going to arise and you'll want to engage in the behavior, even when it's not the planned time.

That's where all the learning happens, and this is when you, number one, get more awareness about what's bringing up this urge, and number two, you learn how to allow urges. So that's the second tool I want to teach you. An urge is just a feeling in your body. It's the desire to take a certain action,

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to put food or a drink in your mouth, to pull your hair, to bite your nails, to jump onto zara.com and start clicking add to cart.

To go play online poker, whatever it is. It's just a desire for a hit of dopamine. That's really all it boils down to. So how do we allow an urge without acting on it? The same way we allow any emotion without acting on it. It's not any different than any other emotion. We allow it to be present in the body without resistance. We don't try to white-knuckle it. We don't try to fight it off or resist it. We don't try to get away from it or ignore it, and we don't answer it or act on it. We just allow it.

We get curious. How does this urge feel? Where is it in my body? How long will it last if I don't answer it? Urges feel kind of urgent. They feel as if they need to be answered or acted on, but they don't. You do not have to answer or act on an urge. You will not die. You can just allow it to be there, neither resisting it nor acting on it.

And what you will find is that when you practice doing that, the urges will start to pass. They will feel intense for a few moments, but most of them won't last more than 10 minutes, and they may reoccur, but you'll have a break in between. They aren't urgent, they aren't dangerous, they aren't fatal, they aren't irresistible. They're just physical sensations in your body that you can allow to be there.

And the more you practice allowing urges without acting on them, the less habituated you get to answering the urge and the easier it gets. So I recommend keeping a list and counting up to 100 urges. And on that list each time, you're going to write down what the urge feels like, what thought and feeling we're having that made you want to take the action.

And if you're working on more than one kind of urge, I would do one at a time, but if you insist on doing more than that, you should have a separate

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list for each urge because the habituated cycle is different for each one. It's really important to understand this is not 100 in a row. It's not a streak.

If you act on or answer an urge, that's fine. You don't go back to zero. You don't start over. It's not like now you're off the wagon. You just practice again the next time and add it to the list. We're just accumulating 100 allowed urges total. Not in a row. When you get to 100 allowed urges, your relationship with this habit is going to be significantly different and often, it'll be over.

So here's the trick to this. Listen closely. You have to actually fucking do it. Not half do it. Not sort of do it. Not write a plan and then ignore it, or for my perfectionist chickens, write a plan, do a couple of them, and then as soon as you don't keep a plan, stop doing them. No. The plan is not there for its own sake. It's a vehicle to find out what's going on with you and give you an opportunity to practice.

So don't write a plan and then ignore it. Don't stop writing plans because you haven't successfully kept one yet. Don't only check some of your urges. Don't practice once every five days if it's a behavior you do every hour. You have to actually plan and track and pay attention. You have to bring your awareness.

If it's a behavior you do every 24 hours, then you should be making a plan every 24 hours. You will not have to do it forever, but you're breaking a habituated pattern and so it takes some effort in the beginning. And if you stop shaming yourself for the behavior in the first place, you will have more energy to focus on changing it.

If you're in The Clutch, you'll have a workbook to help you keep track of what your urges feel like and track accumulating 100 of them. And if you aren't in The Clutch but you struggle with compulsive behaviors or numbing, now is a great time to join so I can really walk you through this.

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And because last week's episode and this week's episode go together, if you join between now and August 7th, you'll get both workbooks.

Normally when you join The Clutch, you only get what we do going forward. You don't get stuff retroactively, but because these episodes are so related and it's like, the same kind of awareness and process, if you join before August 7th, you get the workbook for this episode with the tools and you get the workbook from last episode with all of the awareness and emotional processing stuff, which is super important to understand what's going on with these habits and why you're doing them and get access to those thoughts and feelings so you can change them.

And if not, you can track it on any sheet of paper you want to. Just make sure you write it down. Don't just do it in your head. Your brain is what created this whole situation so it's not going to keep track very well. Alright my chickens. Love your brain. Love your mess. Love yourself. Practice creating change with compassion and awareness instead of shame and avoidance, and you will be amazed how much more effective it can be. I'll talk to you next week.

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](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). I can't wait to see you there.

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