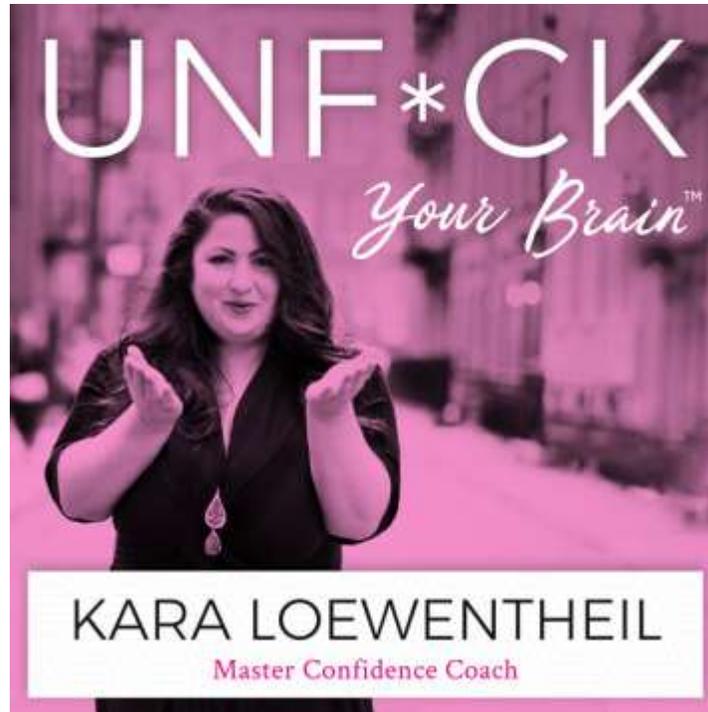


UFYB 95: Aging Anxiety



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? It's been a little while since I recorded a podcast. I'm excited to be talking to you again. I have so much I want to teach you.

So, I am awesome. I just got back from a weekend at the beach with my whole family. I actually enjoyed it and that is a thought work victory right there, not because there's anything wrong with my family of course. It's all my thoughts. Because five years ago, I would not have been able to say the same thing because I was so hypersensitive and self-critical, and so I was really critical of everyone else too.

And I had so many manuals for how everyone else should behave just so I could feel safe, which of course didn't work because constantly monitoring everyone else's behavior to see if they're following your manual doesn't actually feel safe. That's the irony. That's a big change for me but that's not news and this wasn't the first time I've experienced that. I did a lot of work on my thoughts about my family and our relationships a few years ago and since then, it's been pretty smooth sailing.

What I actually noticed on this trip was kind of smaller but in some ways a more fun thing, which was just how much progress I have made really just believing that how I am and my preferences are fine the way they are. This is something I obviously talk about a lot, I've done a lot of work on, but there's always more and more layers that I discover and I find that particularly with family, this stuff can get reactivated because often your thoughts about who you're supposed to be or what it's okay to be like are formed in your family unit because you're a child. That's when that starts.

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And so I definitely find that both - I always find more and more layers to my self-acceptance and my self-love as I do this work, but also particularly being around family can illuminate some of that for me. And so for instance on this trip, we were at the beach, which is where my mother likes to go for her birthday every year, and I don't actually like the beach.

I like the ocean a lot, like I like the beach at night or in winter. I do not like the beach during a summer day. I am about as pale as a Victorian ghost, so it takes like, a bottle of sunscreen a day to avoid getting sunburned. I have to apply it all over my entire body every half an hour. I don't like big crowds, I don't like being really hot. I am someone who gets hot very easily. I really prefer colder weather.

I don't like sand. I don't like children screaming and music playing. I am just not into the beach. I don't go to the beach on my own for fun. If I am planning travel, I'm never like, let's go sit out on the beach. But every year we go to the beach for my mom's birthday and then every year in the past, I would feel bad about how I didn't want to go spend time on the actual beach because I was sort of telling myself that somehow that meant I was lazy, even though that makes zero sense, right?

Because what do you do on the beach? You just lie around in the sun. It's not like you're running a marathon. There's no reason that's more virtuous than anything else. But it was just because most of the other people in my family like going to the beach and they're the ones who - this is where I sort of grew up around. So I sort of had these kind of subconscious thoughts that it's weird to go to the beach and not go to the beach and you should go to the beach and you shouldn't just stay around on the deck or whatever else.

These kind of nonsense thoughts your brain comes up with. But on this trip, I just realized like of course, I just don't like the beach and that's fine. So I might go to a beach town to spend time with my family, but why would I

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then expect myself to want to spend time on the beach when I don't like the beach? It might seem weird to plan a whole vacation to beach town and never go to the beach if there was no other reason for you to be there.

But it's like if you have a business appointment in a town with a beach, it's not weird if you don't go to the beach. You're just going to your business appointment. The same is true here. If I'm going to this town to spend time with my family but I don't personally like the beach, it's not weird to not want to go to the beach.

It's such a little thing but I'm spending time on it because I know that a lot of you listening do this about small things that don't really matter in the scheme of things, but you have subconscious thoughts about and you quietly judge yourself in these - obviously the big loud ways, but then you kind of quietly judge yourself in these little ways and think that you should be different or be like everyone else, or you analyze and criticize your preferences.

And it was such a small thing but it made the whole trip so much more enjoyable for me when I just allowed myself to do what I want, which is I like to get up, I like to go for a walk or a run, I like to make a nice breakfast, and I like to read by the pool in the shade where I don't get sunburn and there's no boom box. There's no sand and I can read a whole novel in a day. That is fun for me.

I can hang out with my family during mealtimes or around it, but I don't need to go the beach and I have - my family really runs the gamut from less active - I would say I'm on the less active side. I like to take a walk, I run a little bit. I like to move my body, but I have siblings who like to go on 15-mile hikes every day. We really - we're all over the place. And giving myself permission to just be me and not feel like I'm supposed to be different.

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And here's the other thing about this story; the other reason I'm telling it to you is when we're resisting that kind of thing and judging ourselves, then we create all this resistance. In this case, when I just allowed myself to actually think about what I preferred, I decided that I did want to go to the beach but I wanted to go at night.

So sometimes what happens is when we are not allowing ourselves to be who we are, have our preference, which of course, a preference is just a thought. I could change that thought if I really wanted to, but why? I wouldn't like my reason. My reason for changing it would be so I don't judge myself for not liking it.

The reason to change a thought is not so I don't judge myself for having the thought. That's not a good reason. So if I had been thinking like, well I should like the beach, I'm supposed to like the beach, then I create all this resistance, then I have to be like, very extreme and not liking the beach to justify it to myself. Think about all the things that are wrong with it.

But instead, when I was like, oh, it's fine that I really don't love the beach and I don't want to go during the day. So I realized that I didn't want to go to the beach during the day, but I did want to go to the beach at night. And so one night my mom and I went out and we laid there at about 11pm for half an hour and it was really beautiful. There was almost a full moon over the water, which for me just always makes me think about the time - ancient civilization, the time before electricity, the time before GPS, when people would navigate on the ocean just using the moon and the stars and what that must have been like.

There was almost no one else out there, it was really quiet, and we had a little bonding moment. And my mom, who loves the beach, that's why we go to this beach every year, said she's never gone out there at night before. So it was like, I got to show her something new about her favorite

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place and we got to connect about that, which was the whole point of being out there for the weekend anyway.

So such a good reminder that when you remove the should and you just let yourself be a little more free from all of that critical evaluation and pressure you put on yourself that's so arbitrary, you not only enjoy life more but you actually create more ways of connecting to other people and showing them something new too.

So in some ways that's just a little story for my life. But it actually ties into this week's podcast a little bit because I know a lot of us struggle when we spend time with family and with our parents in particular, and have trouble connecting to them. And I think that one of the reasons we have so much trouble with that is that so many of us have a lot of unhelpful negative thoughts and feelings about our parents in part because of the ways we're taught to think about aging in our society and as we become adults and our parents get older.

And that's really the topic of this episode. I get a lot of requests to address aging because it's a topic that occupies so many women's minds I think. Not just women, but I do think disproportionately women. People socialized as women or who identify as women. And it causes so much stress and insecurity.

Now, of course, not aging. It's our thoughts about aging that create the feelings of stress, which is just anxiety and insecurity. I think there are a few reasons that some of us struggle so much with our thoughts about aging. So first, I think there's just a general human fear of death for a lot of us. We naturally associate aging with death. If all goes well, that's what comes first. Aging.

And it makes sense that fearing death might be evolutionarily useful. It might have kept some of our more primitive ancestors safe, the ones who

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were pretty worried about death maybe were more careful about doing things that would make them die. So those of us who made it this far in the gene pool might be more likely to think about death and fear it, although I do think it's one of those places where our primitive brain is kind of ironic because the only alternative to aging is dying now.

So if you don't want to die, then embracing aging makes a lot more sense. But our primitive brain is not super logical most of the time, as we know, so I think that on some level, for some of us, there's a general fear of mortality that shows up in a lot of cultures over time. I think in our current culture we live in and when I say we, I am mostly talking about the United States. The culture I know best. But I think the United States also exports its culture and so that spreads globally, and I think that we are living in a very youth-obsessed culture.

In some cultures, older people are revered, or at least respected. Older people are understood to have important wisdom and experience and have a higher place in the social hierarchy. But the United States is a youth-obsessed culture. We like flash and novelty and youth. We publish illicit magazines like the top 30 under 30.

I'm not a sociologist and I can't give a full account of why this is, but I do wonder if it's been exacerbated by technology in a couple of ways. Technology first of all, changes so quickly that young people are always using more advanced technologies than older people. And I also think with modern technology, especially in the last 20 years, we believe we have all the information in the world at our fingertips.

If you think about it, before there was the internet, if you wanted to know something about the past or how things worked that wasn't immediately obvious, or that required some experience or knowledge, you might have asked an older person. The older people in your society, in your village or

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your town or your family or whatever, were the people who knew some shit that you didn't know.

But now we have all the information in the world at our fingertips. And I think we've come to value information for itself rather than wisdom, even though they're very different. Information is just facts. Wisdom is earned through practice and experience. It's meaning. It's interpretation of those facts informed by experience and insight.

So there's a little bit of a sidebar. It's not the main topic of this episode, but whatever the case, we live in a society that really prizes youth. We are taught to think of older people as irrelevant and behind the times and out of date and less smart and less with it. And you just think about the stereotypes of grandparents in American society. They're usually fond but ineffectual and out of touch and don't have a clue.

So I don't think it's any wonder that people of any gender may have anxiety about getting older when we are told over and over again that being old means less important and out of the loop and not cool and kind of a little dodder. It is not a particularly pleasant vision and it doesn't really recognize all of the incredible things that come with age and maturity.

And then I think for women, there's a third factor in particular, which is that women are taught that a woman's value is explicitly tied to her sexuality and specifically, her youth. Her youthful sexuality. I mean, the elderly of either gender are not particularly respected I think in our society, but there's still space in the cultural mythology for the silver fox. Men who are in their 40s or 50s or 60s, maybe even 70s can and often do accumulate power and respect with age.

But there's no equivalent for women, and I'm not saying it doesn't really happen for women. I'm saying in our cultural mythology, what we see in the movies and reflected back to us in advertising and magazines, in the

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movies, you'll see a leading man with silver hair playing opposite a love interest who's a woman 30 years younger than him.

And you will see women playing the mothers of male actors who are only five to 10 years younger than themselves. So you'll see a 40-year-old woman playing the mother of a 30-year-old man, but never the reverse. You don't see a 40-year-old man playing the father of 30-year-old women.

Women were taught that our physical peak is in our teens and 20s. So I really think it's a compound effort of two messages. Compound effect. Well, it's an effort also. It's both. A woman's value is in her physical appearance and sexuality, that's premise one. Premise two, a woman's physical appearance and sexuality have a short shelf life.

So in other words, we're taught that the most important thing about us is, to put it bluntly, whether men, the collective, want to fuck us and that men only want to fuck us for a short period of time. So I don't think it's any wonder that women become obsessed with their appearance and dread the signs of aging.

And then of course women are also criticized for being vain and trying to appear young, as if that's a character flaw instead of a very reasonable response to these messages. Now, when I saw reasonable, I don't mean we should leave our thoughts that way. I'm going to talk about that in a little bit, but it makes sense that if these are the messages you get, you're then going to be having thoughts about focusing on your appearance and trying to control it. Makes sense.

And so given that women are taught that their value is in looking a certain way, of course there's really no age at which most women are not worrying about their appearance, so I do think to some extent, worrying about aging is kind of a red herring in the following way. Often, our brain has one

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premise like you should worry about how you look, and it just changes the justification over time.

So your brain tells you in your 40s that sure, you didn't need to worry about wrinkles in your 20s but now you do. But in your 20s, your brain told you you had to worry about your thigh size or your acne or whatever else. It's all symptoms of the same underlying though pattern. And that happens in all areas of our life.

Like first your brain will tell you to worry that you're not qualified to get a job, then as soon as you get the job, your brain tells you to worry that you're not qualified enough to lead the next meeting or whatever. It's like the underlying pattern is I'm not qualified, and then your brain just adapts it to each different circumstance.

So to some extent, I think some of the worry that we have about aging is the same thing, it's just the new justification for worrying about how we look is aging when it used to be something else in our 20s or 30s or 40s. But either way, regardless, so long as you believe that your value or worth depends on how you look, you will be obsessed with how you look. And if you believe your age is part of that, you will get obsessed with again.

And I always think it's actually kind of a funny paradox that you're supposed to be thin but not have wrinkles because faces that have more fat on them actually wrinkle less and more slowly. It's just such a little beautiful Catch 22. There's no way to win.

So I think all of these messages that women get about their value and their attractiveness and aging taken together is what creates these thoughts that produce all the anxiety and insecurity and fear about aging. It's a fear that is about the loss of approval and about the loss of power and control. And this is the part that I don't think women are as much aware of sometimes.

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Women are taught that how they look, their sexual appeal is their power, that that's our most valuable asset. It's not about vanity. It's about power and about relevance. But the good news is it's all been a lie. Your power does not come from how you look. Power is not a C. Powerful is an F. It's a feeling.

Sorry, sometimes I use the shorthand. Power is not a thing out in the world that's true about you. When you want to feel powerful, what you want is a feeling. It's not a circumstance of having power. No one wants power for its own sake. Even if power exists in the world, it's not something we want for its own sake. What we want is to feel powerful.

And really, what we want is to feel empowered because it's not really about believing or feeling that we have power over other people. We only want power over other people when we don't feel that we have power over ourselves. It's about believing in our own power within ourselves. It's about feeling empowered, like an agent who can act upon the world on our own behalf rather than a passive object that the world acts upon.

And feeling powerful doesn't have anything to do with how you look. Just ask the 17-year-old international fashion model who is subsisting on cigarettes and coffee and probably cocaine and is terrified of gaining a pound. The person who is held up as the extreme perfection of feminine beauty and sexuality. She might be booking magazine covers, she might be making millions of dollars, but I guarantee you that so long as she believes her relevance and her career and her value depend on how gaining more than a pound, she does not feel powerful.

Power is about feeling a feeling we want to have, feeling powerful in ourselves. We never feel powerful when we are telling ourselves that we have to control what other people think of us. You know who is powerful is the crone. Some of you are like, what the fuck are you talking about?

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In many cultures, there are three archetypes of women. The maiden, the mother, and the crone. They relate roughly the age. The maiden is young, the mother is in the middle of her life, the crone is old. And they relate to stages of women's sexuality. The maiden is a virgin. The mother is sexually active but for procreation. And the crone is past the age of sexuality.

And we are currently culturally obsessed with the maiden and the mother to a lesser degree. We're not obsessed with virginity but with young women and their sexual appeal, and I think we have a whole other separate kind of fetishization of the mother happening, which is a whole other podcast. But we do not pay a lot of attention to the crone and we should.

The crone is powerful. The crone lives outside society's little boxes. The crone doesn't give a fuck about her fuckability. The crone has no fucks to give at all, and that's why she's often demonized in myths and fairytales, in culture. She exists outside of the sexual identities, of the identity options that women are given. She isn't held back by the social rules that apply to the virgin and the mother.

Imagine what you would do in your life if you were not worried about what other people thought and you didn't care who wanted to sleep with you. Even if you're not worried about who wants to sleep with you literally, I'm using this as a metaphor for our investment in the tyranny of conventional beauty norms. Or even unconventional - it all has to do with your own little subgroup.

You might belong to a social subgroup or an aesthetic or a social community of some kind where the aesthetic norms are different from the conventional ones, but they still can be equally kind of restrictive trying to meet them. Imagine if you just did not give a fuck about what other people thought of you and you had no investment in trying to live up to society's standards of beauty and focusing a lot of your energy and attention on being sexually desirable.

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That is the power of the crone. That is why I do not fear getting older. It's not because of my age. If you're 60 listening to this, you might be thinking well, you're in your 30s. I have clients in my 30s who are terrified about it. I have clients in my 20s freaked out about it. We have people in their 20s getting Botox so that they don't get wrinkles way before they would ever get wrinkles.

It has nothing to do with what your actual age is. It has to do with your thoughts, and I don't have those thoughts. For one thing - and I don't mean I've never had them. I mean, I've done work on them. So for one thing, I think learning to love my body as a fat woman who society labels disgusting and unappealing has taught me that feeling attractive comes entirely from your own thoughts, and there are always people attracted to you at any size or shape, and that's true as you get older too.

But for another thing and more importantly, I find that the older I get and the more I work with these thoughts, the less I care what other people think and the less it matters to me whether I'm conventionally attractive or fuckable or not. And I kind of want to clarify here that I'm not saying that older people don't have sex. Of course they do.

And I'm not even saying that we may not want to choose to make finding sexual partners kind of an important part of our life. And I'm someone who is pretty open about enjoying dating and sex, so it's not like it's not something that matters to me, but it's very different to believe who I am and the more that I become myself that there are partners available to me at any stage of life, versus oh no, I'm getting older, I'm going to lose all of my access to sex, intimacy, approval, validation, whatever.

This is not - when I talk about the crone or when I talk about not caring about who wants to sleep with you, that actually doesn't have anything to do with whether or not you have sex and find partners. It has to do with

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your emotional and mental investment in obsessing about trying to control that. So this is a very important distinction.

Like, in my vision of the crone, she might totally have a hot young thing tucked away in her hut in the woods. But she doesn't have him here or her there, whoever there because she's so obsessed with trying to maintain an appearance that is younger than she is. If anything, she has that partner because she embraces where she actually is in her life. So I just want to clarify that.

For me, what getting older so far has meant is becoming more and more in love with myself and giving fewer and fewer fucks about what other people think. So that's what I'm talking about. Not whether or not you actually have sex or a partner or whatever else, but how much you are focusing your mental and emotional energy on trying to make sure that other people think you're attractive by trying to control your body to fit into a standard of beauty that is completely focused on - it's basically created by 18 year olds.

So I'm 38 now and when I think about what I'll be like at 45 or 50 or 60 or 70, I honestly cannot wait to meet that version of me. I just think about how I've done so much work to give fewer fucks about what society and other people think about me, and it's still a work in progress but I have made so much progress, that's why I'm able to be an unapologetic fat woman in the world who dates and has sex and loves her body.

It's why I'm able to build this business and really what I think of as this mission to change women's lives and not care that people say shit in the comments on my Facebook posts or write me emails about how terrible I am, whatever it is. My ability to be okay putting myself out there. So if I've gotten that far now, I just imagine how few fucks I am going to give by then. I am so excited to meet that version of myself. Like what will I have learned by then?

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So listen, you can do some thought ladders on aging and attractiveness. I'm not saying that's not useful. You can paper your walls with photos of Helen Mirren. Fill your Instagram with accounts of women who are older than you. I love it. Do that. I think it's useful.

You don't have to believe society's lies about how no one wants to have sex with older women. You just get on Tinder for a bit, you will see there are plenty of guys in their 20s who are listing their age as 45 or 50 because they want to match with older women. It's just not true and never will be true that human sexuality can be reduced to simplistic stereotypes that society teaches us.

But that's an intermediate step on the train because it still takes for granted that being sexually attractive should be the main thing that women think about. And I'm not saying it should be nowhere on your list, but I don't think it should be your main preoccupation in life, which for a lot of us it is because that's what society teaches us and does not teach men the same thing.

And I really think it's because our fear of aging is about our fear of powerlessness. There's this social powerlessness in the way I've just been discussing, which is the power that women are supposed to yield being related to their perceived fuckability, but then there's the powerlessness and also in the sense of our fear of not being able to entirely take care of ourselves. Our fear about physical diminishment. Our fear that not being as physically hale and hearty and whole, for those of us who feel we are that right now, means the diminishment of our worth or our value or our mental and emotional experience as well.

And really, wherever you are, I'm somebody who has chronic illness and chronic pain and so compared to someone who runs marathons all the time, I might already think well, I'm already physically constrained than they are, but then my brain still thinks - so I might be now the version that the

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marathon runner fears, but then my brain just comes up with another version to fear. Wherever are on the spectrum, our brain conjures up this image of us as older and not having the physical capabilities we have and being afraid about that.

Because the fetishization of youth makes us fear and dread being older, but that's not because age is inherently pathetic or aging is inherently awful, or it's inherently a problem to be less physically capable or even a little less mentally sharp than you are now. All of this fear, it's because of what we are thinking about getting older and being older, and we are ignoring the truth that at any age, our thoughts are what will determine our experience, whatever our physical capabilities. Even whatever our mental capabilities.

The way that we choose to think about things, even if we start to lose some of our memory, we can either think thoughts that are very upset about that or we can accept it and not resist it, and that will make a huge difference. At any stage, as long as you have some consciousness, how you choose to respond to whatever your circumstance is will determine how you feel.

And ironically, of course when we resist the prospect of getting older, what we are resisting is our current reality right now. The progress of time is inexorable. At least in the way we experience it. Some physicists will tell us that it's an illusion, but we don't experience it that way. When we aren't willing to get older, when we are trying to seem younger, we are rejecting our current self.

If you are trying to look younger, you are telling yourself how you are now is not okay. And if you are trying to hold off getting older, you are telling yourself who you will be tomorrow is not okay. We are rejecting our current selves and our current reality. That will always feel terrible.

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I will always in my life coach training class, on the first day, my teacher was coaching this woman who wanted to lose weight. And she asked her why and the woman said well, when I just lose these 25 pounds, I'm going to feel better, I'm going to be happier, and I'm going to be younger. She said that about 10 times. My teacher kept saying why do you want to lose the weight? Say that again, think about what you're saying. And every time she said I'm going to be younger.

When you tell yourself it's better to be younger, you're telling yourself that the best times of your life are behind you. How depressing is that? That your life is already worse than it once was and it's only going to go downhill. That's what you're telling yourself.

I remember being in high school and college and people would tell me these are the best years of your life, and I would think, I fucking hope not. How terrible would that be? And thankfully, they weren't. My life keeps getting better and better because I do the thought work to make it better and better. I choose to love myself more and more and harder and harder.

I choose to embrace my current reality and always work on that. And people say youth is wasted on the young, but I think what's more accurate is to say the present is always wasted on us at any age when we are not stopping to appreciate and experience it, when we are not willing to be with it and in it. There's nothing wrong with being any age, so there's nothing wrong with aging.

No matter what age you are, your experience is created by your thoughts. Your current thoughts about aging were programmed into your brain without you even realizing it, but it's your job to rewrite that code. It's not going to just happen magically.

And that is going to require that you decide for yourself how you want to value yourself. What do you want to put your value on? What do you want

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to believe about your worth and why you're here and what you're supposed to do with your time?

How do you want to spend your time on this earth so that at the end, you don't look back and wish that you hadn't wasted the decades trying to stay fuckable in conventional society's eyes for as long as possible, instead of creating whatever it is, like your macramé masterpiece, or going on safari, or starting a commune or becoming a CEO, or whatever else you want to do?

You have to create your own value and decide what that is for yourself. When you have that, you don't care what anyone else thinks. And when you are living a life you love with purpose and intention and you have learned how to be present with and love any current moment, you have no reason to fear what's to come because you know that you have lived on purpose and that you are creating your experience with your thoughts, no matter what circumstances you are in.

That is why I can't wait to meet the version of myself that I'm going to become and I want that feeling for all of you too. I know that this episode covered a lot and went pretty deep. So if you have questions about it or anything else, I am doing another Ask Kara Anything webinar soon. August 26th, 1:30pm Eastern. These webinars are free.

You can register either at the show notes link, which is just www.unfuckyourbrain.com/95. That's the episode page. There's a link to the webinar registration page there. And if you're international and you can't text, that's what you should use or if you just prefer to do it online. Unfuckyourbrain.com/95.

Or you can text your email address to 347-997-1784. 347-997-1784. Use the email that you already use if you get emails from me already, and when you get the prompt for the code word, you just text back August. You'll be

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automatically registered. And we will send out a replay if you can't attend live. I know I have listeners all over the world.

I do want you to try to attend live if you can because there's a special bonus for folks who attend live. And the reason that I do that, so you guys understand is that I know myself from having done this, it's really easy to just sign up for something and be like, I'll watch the replay at some point and then you never do. Even I have a list of replays that I'm meaning to watch, but they always get pushed back behind something that seems more urgent.

So I really want to incentivize you to show up live and learn live. So I'm going to teach a coaching model that you can use on anything in your life starting on the call. It will change your life. I want you to know it, I want to make sure you learn it, so I want you to try to show up live. And I do vary the time when I do these webinars over the year because that way, whatever time zone you're in, you do have a chance to be able to show up live.

But if you can be live at 1:30pm Eastern, I really encourage you to do that. Alright, so I think that's everything about the webinar. The webinar is next week. We're going to be a few days older by then and we're going to be a few days more awesome. I will see you there.

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

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