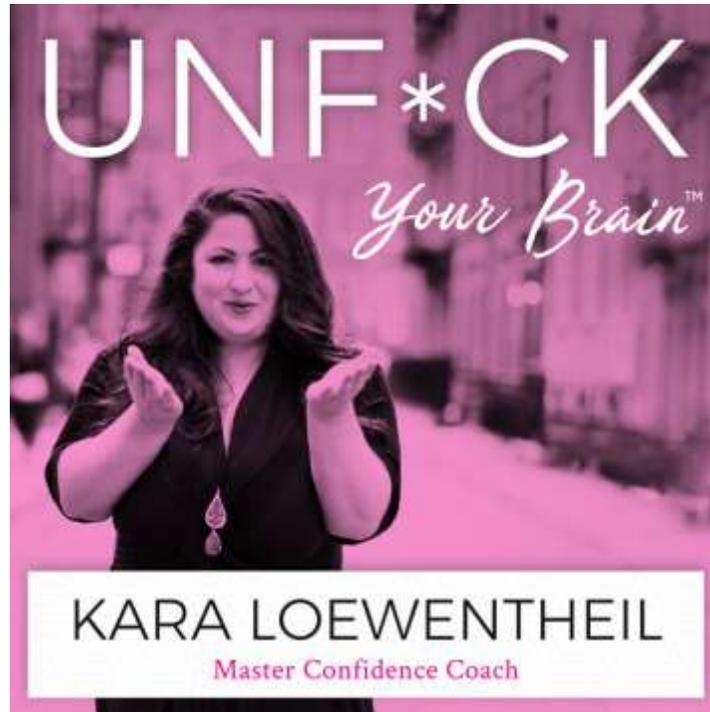


UFYB 101: The Human Ecosystem



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. I am coming to you, at least writing these notes really, from Martha's Vineyard. So I'm actually as I'm talking, recording it, I just got back from Martha's Vineyard. And it's beautiful there. If you've been there you know that.

There's a lot of really beautiful nature and they pay a lot of attention to kind of preserving the local ecosystem there and preserving the experience of the island. And it has me thinking about something that I talked about briefly in another podcast. I sort of mentioned it in my intro to a separate topic, but a lot of y'all really loved it.

I got a lot of feedback about it and requests for more exploration of the topic, and I agree that it really deserves a full episode because it has been a life-changing concept for me. And that is what I call the concept of the human ecosystem.

So I developed this concept in my last long-term relationship. Towards the beginning when I was doing a lot of thought work on learning to accept my partner the way that he was. I found thought work around the time we got together. This was years ago.

And that was a challenge for me because the way I grew up, there was no such thing as not having an opinion about someone else's behavior. I come from a Jewish family. That was literally a foreign concept to me that you could just not have opinions about other people's behavior.

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And I don't think that I'm alone in that and you know, Jews are not a huge proportion of the population. I don't think we're alone in it either. A lot of us have quite a lot of opinions about other people's behavior, especially if they're close to us. The closer they get to us, the more opinions we have.

So you start with that idea, which is that it's totally natural just to have opinions about what everyone says and does all the time, and then you add on – it's a romantic relationship, so it pings all of our validation triggers. And then you add that I was just learning thought work so this was all news to me, so I had a lot of thoughts about how if he would just do a few things differently, I would be happy.

And that's what we all think, right? We think if my partner took out the trash, I would feel equal and respected. These are just hypothetical examples. He actually was great about taking out the trash, which I hate doing. If my partner wanted to come to family events, I would feel loved and normal. If my partner just touched me 23% more often in this specific way, I would believe I'm fully lovable.

These are the thoughts we have about our partner's behaviors or anyone outside of us, their behaviors. If they would just change how they behave a little bit, we could feel differently. And these are all lies, of course. We just don't know that they're lies. They seem so compelling.

So with my last partner, for instance, these are the real examples and I'm going to tell you what they are because that will help me explain the ecosystem and neither of these are things that he would – I don't know if he listens to the podcast but he would not be unaware of these.

The two things I struggled with were that he was often running late and that he wanted a lot of alone time. He was very introverted. So my first attempt to resolve these "problems" was I just tried being upset when he did things I didn't like. I just tried being upset or sulking or complaining.

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That was very effective, as you can imagine. It's extremely appealing when someone does that. It really makes you want to change your behavior. Totally alters your personality when someone else is upset about it.

So that didn't work. And then I did this thing that I think a lot of us do when we first discover coaching, which is that I tried to use coaching tools to problem solve his behavior. Like I would think, okay now I know thoughts cause feelings, cause actions, so if he's late, I just have to find out what is the thought causing him to be late. Then I'll just help him see that and change his thought and then he won't be late.

Or if I can just break down what thought makes him want alone time or feel introverted, I can teach him to change that and then he won't be introverted, he won't want alone time, and he won't be late. My brain was so sneaky. It was like, oh great, I learned this work and so now instead of changing my own thoughts, I will use it to change other people's thoughts so their feelings and actions will change so I can be happy.

I was like, I'm going to coach them, I'm going to change their model so my C will change, my circumstance will change, then I'll feel great. So I was very surprised that didn't work. This is the beginning of my thought work journey. Really thought that was a fool-proof plan.

So eventually obviously I was left with no option but to try and change my thoughts, or to end the relationship, or to stay upset. I guess really, I had three options. End the relationship, stay in the relationship but be upset and mad all the time about these things, or stay in the relationship and learn to love him the way he was.

And since I'm a coach I picked number three because of course, the reason I wanted him to change these things was what I was making them mean and how I thought they were making me feel. So I did work directly

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on those thoughts to address them. I used the model, which is the self-coaching tool I teach when you work with me.

I did work on my specific thoughts about why I wanted him to be different, but that's sort of like, the responding to the negative thoughts. I also came up with this sort of proactive positive concept that I fell in love with, and that's what I call the human ecosystem.

Because what I realized when I was doing this work was that I was believing if I could just change these few things about my partner, then he would be better. And I was thinking about it like he was a machine, which I think is really common. Right now, whatever kind of age of culture people are in, we use metaphors for ourselves and our brains and our bodies and the way we work that kind of match the dominant kind of technologies of the time, I think.

So during the industrial revolution, I think we all started to think and talk about ourselves like we were machines. Now you often – I talk all the time about the brain being like computer code. We're in the information technology epic right now, or age.

So I think we have some really leftover machine thinking that we use when we talk that impacts how we think about people because I was thinking about it as if I could just reach in and adjust a couple of the gears and then the machine would work exactly the way I wanted it to.

Or we could use a computer metaphor too as like, there were a few bugs in the code. If I just worked that out, the rest of the code was great. It was like, most of this is good, I just want to change these few things and keep all the stuff I already like and then just change the few things I don't like and then it'll be perfect.

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I just need to change that line of code or grease that wheel. Whatever you change in a machine. Adjust that gear. But that underlying belief created so much suffering for me because I just kept thinking that if I could keep the things I liked about him and change the things that I didn't, then I would be happier.

And I think we do this with so many people in our lives. If your kid could just keep her enthusiasm and joy because you love seeing the world new through her eyes, but stop whining so much. That would be better. If your child could just have the childlike wonder part of being a child but skipped the annoying parts.

If your partner could be really supportive and spend a lot of time at home with you like you like, but stop playing video games. That's not what you want him to be doing when he wants to be spending time at home with you. If your sister could keep her fun-loving nature, but just be more ambitious with her career because you really think she's holding herself back.

We have so many ideas about how people should be and we want to tweak them until the people match our manual. We want them to be like, bespoke custom ordered to our exact specifications. We want to go to the people store and upgrade the model, keep the things we like, but change the ones we don't.

But that is not how people work and that's why I prefer to think of everyone in my life as having their own human ecosystem. So here's what that means. There's an idea called the butterfly effect, and it's the idea that a tiny change in one place can create huge changes in another place.

So the example often used, which is a metaphor in some ways, this is not a scientifically proven thing, or maybe it's really an example. I'm not sure it's a metaphor. But the idea is that a butterfly flapping its wings in Chicago could cause a hurricane in Japan.

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You see a little bit of a similar concept in chaos theory, which is a field in mathematics that studies the behavior of dynamic systems that are very sensitive to small changes in the starting conditions. So like, if the starting conditions of the system are a tiny bit different, you might get a wildly varying result.

And we see this in nature all the time, I think. Small changes that really impact a whole ecosystem. For instance, I was talking about this with my brother when I was working on this podcast. We were at Martha's Vineyard together and he said yeah, it's like red tides. A red tide is something that happens especially after a storm where a bloom of algae disrupts the entire aquatic atmosphere. Kills sea life for miles and the changes cascade.

Or we were talking about how apparently, starlings, which are a bird in North America now were introduced to North America by someone who wanted to bring over the birds mentioned in Shakespeare. And that obviously had a ripple effect on the whole ecosystem, to bring in a new species.

So I love this idea applied to people, although it applies to anything in life. What if the same reason that my ex was always late is the same reason that he wrote me love songs? Because he was creative and he tended to get lost in his thoughts, or be listening to music or writing something and lose track of time?

What if the reason that he wanted a lot of alone time was actually the same reason I wanted a lot of alone time, which is that we're both very independent and somewhat introverted? And our relationship allowed us both a really wide latitude that most people don't have in their romantic relationships.

And I was ignoring the fact that we were 90% aligned on that. I just wanted to adjust his setting to 10% more time together so that it would match

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exactly my settings. But what if changing that would completely change the independent dynamic that I loved and a lot of the things I really admired about him? Like his creative projects and his ability to spend time with himself and to do things in the city on his own and always be good company with himself.

Obviously, these are all thought experiments. I couldn't change him or anyone else even if I wanted to. But thinking about him as an ecosystem where making one small change would disrupt the whole balance was a revelation. And that's why I decided to call it the human ecosystem.

Because the truth is that anyone you love or even like, or honestly, even if you don't like them, they aren't a machine where you can just adjust the levers and tinker with the settings and get that perfect partner or parent or boss or friend you imagine you could order from the catalogue.

They are a whole human ecosystem. Every element is attached to and dependent on and interacts with every other. So if you want to love your kid's creativity and joy and sensitivity, you have to love their tantrums too. If they're sensitive to joy, they'll be sensitive to sadness, and right now they don't know how to process that.

If you want to love your partner's brilliant mind, you have to love that it's a mind that gets lost in thought and forgets to pick up the dry cleaning, or in a memorable example from a couple of friends of mine, leaves butter on the chair. If you want to love your friend's ambition and drive, you have to also love that she checks her emails sometimes when you hang out because she's keeping an eye on that big deal.

It's all part of the same human ecosystem. The things you love are intimately connected to the ones you wish you could change. Changing only the small things you don't like and keeping what you do is not an

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option. Your options are to love the whole human ecosystem or don't, and you get to choose.

And really, this extends beyond loving other people. So first, it extends to you. You're a human ecosystem also. I love how introspective I am. It's what gives me the ability to be a great coach, I think, or one of the abilities. But if I want to love that, I need to also love about myself that sometimes I need a push to spend time with other people and connect.

I have to love that if I don't manage my mind and make an effort, I may default to being a little bit isolated and getting lost in my own world. It's not a problem. It doesn't mean there's anything wrong with me. That's just my ecosystem's tendencies.

I love how in touch I am with my body's physical sensations. I think that's why I'm able to help teach other women how to process their emotions without being overwhelmed and how to tell when they believe a thought even just a little bit and how to get more comfortable in sex and in sexuality and in being sexy for themselves or with a partner.

Like my ability to experience tiny fluctuations in my own body and really break down what different feelings are like is what helps me teach other women to do that. But that means I need to also love that I'm also very sensitive to physical discomfort. I hate waistbands and itchy fabrics. I don't really wear pants.

And I don't really have any ability or desire to suppress emotions or for instance, tears when they come. Even if it's not socially acceptable all the time. I can't have exquisite presence with myself and be able to just shove down my emotions if they're inconvenient. I can't have both those things.

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I have to embrace the whole ecosystem. So whatever you dislike about yourself, I want you to think about how you could see it as part of your ecosystem. You don't have to love that thing yet if you don't want, but how is it at least related to things that you love or value about yourself?

And although I call this the human ecosystem. It's not really even related just to humans because you can think about any circumstance in your life the same way. Maybe your job involves too many meetings, but it also lets you connect and brainstorm with so many interesting minds and that's something you really value about it.

Maybe you're a PTA or the non-profit board you're on spends two hours debating what kind of drinks to serve at an event. Totally hypothetical. Or perhaps pulled from my real-life experience. But it also gives you a chance to exercise your facilitation and leadership skills.

Every part of an ecosystem has a role to play. Characteristics in a person or people in a larger community or world. Thinking of yourself as part of the ecosystem of your own family or workplace or friend group or city or state, or even country, will help you to see the ways in which you do show up, you do contribute, and you bring value to other people and relationships.

And you can even use it to appreciate your little ecosystem. This is what I talked about a little bit in a previous podcast. For instance, now, it's started getting dark early, which I have a lot of thoughts and feelings about. My friend Kelly can attest to this because I keep sending her all caps texts at sunset every night about how dark it is.

But I'm also really enjoying the crisp autumn air. Even though it was 90 here in Manhattan yesterday. And I can't have one without the other. At least not in this location, which leads me to one last important point I want to make about loving your ecosystem, human or otherwise.

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So whenever I teach about what Byron Katie would call loving what is, or what a meditation teacher would call acceptance, it just means accepting and loving what is present in our lives. The big concern I hear back is that if you love something, you won't change it.

But it's the opposite. It's hating something that doesn't change it. It only changes you, and not in the way you want. If I just focus on how I hate that it's getting dark, I feel like a victim. Like the sun is out to get me. I don't appreciate the brisk fall wind; I don't take delight in my surroundings.

But even less intuitively, I don't take any action to move. You'd think that if I hate something about where I live, I would move, right? Wrong. Because when I hate something about where I live, what that means is I am telling myself that my circumstances cause my feelings.

And that means then I have to worry about how if I move, something else, wherever I might move might also cause negative feelings. You see what I'm saying? So when I believe that I'm unhappy because it's dark, then I have to worry that if I move to the desert where it's light, maybe I'll be unhappy because it's hot there.

I'm kind of reinforcing the idea in my brain that something in the place I live can make me unhappy. And so then I don't move from where I am because then I'm thinking about what might make me unhappy in this other place. So many people think that being unhappy with their partner is what will motivate them to end it because they "should."

But that's not what I see. What I often see is that when people are unhappy because their partner doesn't act the way they want, they do not break up with them because now they're just worried that they'll be unhappy being single or that they'll be unhappy dating the next person, or that they won't find someone.

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If you're telling yourself that something about your partner or anything external in your life, in your relationship, or lack of a relationship causes your feelings, then you're not motivated to change the state. It works both ways. If you tell yourself you're unhappy being single, you'd think that would motivate you to find a relationship but that's not what happens.

Because now you're looking for the person to change your feelings and the relationship to cause your happiness, and when that doesn't happen right away, you think it's the wrong one. You just move on.

This is why hating something doesn't motivate you to change. Because what you're doing is believing that an external circumstance, like where you live or who you're married to causes your feelings. Then you can't change it because you're worried about the negative feelings that the change might bring because you're not taking responsibility for your own emotions.

You can change your external ecosystem in some ways. You can move cities. You can move to a literal different physical ecosystem. You can change partners or get a new job. You can enter other human or organizational ecosystems.

And you can change some of your internal ecosystem too. You can become less anxious, more resilient, happier, that's what thought work is about. I 100% believe that. But the work of loving all the ecosystems you're in, that's what is always the same. That's the constant.

There will always be sun and dark. There will always be hot and cold. There will always be desert and snow. You have to love it all. There's no human ecosystem where it's always sunny and 70 degrees and it never rains but the landscape is always lush.

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There's no human ecosystem like that and there's no natural ecosystem like that. That's not how nature works. You have to accept and love it all. The ecosystem in which we live, the human ecosystems of the people around you. And the human ecosystem of yourself.

Alright my chickens, love your human ecosystem. Have a beautiful week and I'll talk to you next week.

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