

UFYB 99: Fear and Safety



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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? How are you all? That was a weird way of saying that. I'm amazing. I'm often amazing, but I'm particularly amazing because I actually am coming off of a few days on the struggle bus, my friends, mon poulet.

There was not even – there was nothing particularly wrong. I mean, there's nothing particularly wrong. It's just thoughts. But it's just so interesting when you get to the point where you can watch your brain without judging it. Even when you're having unhelpful thoughts, you can just be curious about them.

And my brain definitely had a lot of weird shit to say this weekend. It was pretty sure that it hated everyone and the world was over and nothing would ever be good again. It's just a little 48 hours of crazy.

I'm telling you guys this because I want you to know that my brain still does this. The difference between me and some of you is that I don't freak out when it does. I don't make it mean that I'm backsliding in thought work. I don't say I was making progress, I was doing so well and now I'm not, or I'm regressing, or whatever else.

And I don't make it mean anything about me as a person. I just kind of settle back on the struggle bus and I look out the window, just observe the scenery until we get to my stop. And usually, if I'm willing to go on the ride, where I get out is actually kind of amazing.

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Sometimes it's like your brain has been working on a problem, and even though it's been throwing a temper tantrum about working on it, once I solve it I'm usually really glad that I was willing to take that ride. And this time when I got off the struggle bus, I realized that I was thinking and teaching a lot recently about safety.

And so that's what I want to teach you all about today. I think that one of the reasons that I'm now comfortable on the struggle bus is that I don't make it mean that I'm not safe in some way.

So before I really get started though, I want to clarify. There is obviously such a thing as physical safety, meaning whether your body is in danger of experiencing physical harm. Now, I kind of want to put a parenthetical. The deeper you go in thought work, the more you realize even those terms are subjective.

What some people consider very physically harmful some people don't mind or even like all because of what they think about it, but I think we can – as lawyers say, we can stipulate that there are some forms of actual physical danger that we all agree would be dangerous that exist.

Like, if you're running towards a cliff with your eyes closed or you're going to jump out of a plane without a parachute, you are in danger. High risk of imminent, serious bodily harm or death. That's physical danger and there's such a thing as physical safety, meaning you are not currently in danger.

But what I'm really talking about on this podcast is emotional safety. And emotional safety I think is just the absence of fear. So physical safety is really just the absence of danger. Emotional safety is really just the absence of fear.

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I don't think we have an emotion that feels like safety in the sense of kind of a set of sensations in your body that are only associated with that feeling. I think when we talk about feeling safe, what we really mean is that we don't feel afraid. The absence of feeling fear.

For instance, if you were just sitting around in your normal life and you're not thinking about any threats, I don't think you really feel "safe" or "unsafe." You're just not thinking about your safety or your lack thereof. Similarly, when people feel relieved, you only feel relief if you were previously feeling something negative.

If you're just feeling neutral, you don't sit around your house when you haven't had any negative emotion thinking well, I just feel so relieved. It only exists in comparison to the negative emotion. I think safety as a feeling really only exists in relation to fear. It's the absence of fear. We call that safety.

But if you start thinking about a threat, you feel unsafe and in danger. So if you're sitting around not thinking about threats or safety, you feel neither, but if you start thinking about a threat, you feel unsafe or in danger. That feels like anxiety usually, which is fear. Anxiety is a form of fear.

And then if you believe you've protected yourself from the threat, you've neutralized the threat or protected yourself, then you "feel safe." That's the absence of fear.

So here's what's kind of wild. Fear and safety are not exceptions to thought work. Fear is an emotion created by your thoughts, and safety is an emotion or the absence of an emotion, if it's just the absence of fear, that is also created by your thoughts.

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You can be walking around and you can be in grave physical danger from a tsunami or a serial killer that are right around the block, but if you don't know about them, you feel fine and you can be completely physically safe in a given moment, but if you imagine future danger, you'll feel very afraid.

Some people jump out of airplanes and feel excited about it, and some people are terrified to cross the street, even when they can't see any cars because one might appear out of nowhere. Part of what makes danger and safety so – not tricky, but sort of interesting to challenging I think to think and talk about is that we have the original set of emotions of fear and safety that evolved to correspond to our perceptions of physical danger or lack of physical danger.

That's the lizard part of your brain is just like, am I actually going to be eaten or killed? That's danger. If I don't feel like I'm about to be imminently eaten or killed, that's safety. But then we have these big complicated messy human brains and we've developed the idea of emotional danger or emotional safety. And we think that other people or circumstances can make us feel emotionally unsafe, which really just means that we think we may have negative thoughts or feelings.

Feeling emotionally unsafe is just either having negative thoughts or feelings that we don't like, or fearing that we may have them in the future. Because if it's not physical danger that we're fearing, what we're fearing are thoughts and feelings that we might have.

The irony is what truly makes us emotionally unsafe is not knowing how to manage our minds and take responsibility for our own brains. Because if we know that we get to choose what we want to think and feel about ourselves no matter what, no one can take that away from us or control us, or make us think or feel things against our will.

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Now, that's because we're adults now. If you're listening to this podcast. If you're an eight-year-old, this podcast, it does not apply to you. As children, most of us did not know these tools.

I should clarify because some of you teach that work to your kids. What I mean is I'm about to talk about what it's like as a child who doesn't know these tools. That's what I meant when I said this podcast doesn't apply to eight-year-olds. I don't mean nothing I teach is applicable to children. Of course, some of it is.

So as children, back on track here, most of us did not know these tools. We did not know how to manage our minds. We literally depended on our parents for survival. So depending on what your childhood home or school or experience or whatever else was like, you may have developed some beliefs about being safe or not being safe.

And you may have been physically safe or physically not safe, and you may have felt – things may have been stable or unstable and so you may have felt safe or unsafe, or really felt afraid or safe. The problem is that we believe these thoughts and these stories for so long that they just seem true.

And because our brain evolved to keep us alive at all costs, there's nothing it takes more seriously than "feeling unsafe." So if you tell yourself that you are unsafe, or you tell yourself that you feel unsafe, your brain hyper-focuses on that. It's one job in life becomes trying to get you away from the danger so you can feel safe even though the danger, if you are not in physical danger, is just your own thoughts.

So I actually want to talk about this in the context of the body because I've been experiencing this in a whole new way in my body recently, and it's a little bit of an in-depth example but I think it's really illuminating, and sometimes it's easier to understand these things in examples.

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So what I love about this example is that it really has to do with my brain's perception of when my body is safe. For me, I would say that recognizing that emotional safety is found from managing my mind came fairly easily. Now, not naturally. Someone had to teach me and I definitely had to work at it.

Do not get me wrong. Do not hear this to say that I didn't work on it and if you need to work on it, there's something wrong with you. I totally had to work on it. But logically it made sense once I understood it, that all I was fearing was my own thoughts and feelings, and as long as I was managing my mind, I was safe in this emotional, mental sense.

But doing this work on what my brain thinks is unsafe for my body has been much more challenging for me, and I think that makes sense because physical safety is one of our primitive brain's main concerns in life. So understanding this at a deeper level through this work I've been doing on my body, which I'm about to tell you about has made a huge difference in my understanding of safety and whether or why it's important to feel safe at all.

So here is the story. In the last year, I started lifting weights with a new trainer and then more recently I've been working with a new physical therapist. And before all of this, I pretty much just believed what my body told me. And I had worked with trainers and physical therapists before, I'd gotten every kind of bodywork in the world and I sort of just believed that whatever my physical sensations were telling me was true.

And it's this common, just like we believe our thoughts before someone tells us that they might not be true. We believe the signals we get from our body. So when something hurt, I believed something had gone wrong. There were things that didn't feel good, they were uncomfortable or painful, I didn't do them because they were uncomfortable or painful and I thought that was a problem.

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And in a funny way, I think a lot of the self-love and kind of wellness and self-development literature I read was unhelpful in this regard because there's so much talk about trusting your body and listening to your body's wisdom, and kind of elevating the body above the brain. Above the mind.

Now obviously, I think our bodies are very important. I teach that our emotions take place in our bodies. Those emotions are what tell us whether we believe a thought or not, they motivate our behavior. That's super important.

But what I've learned working on this over the last year or two is that even when we think the body is sending us a message, it is still coming from the brain. And a lot – because the brain is what processes all the sensations and tells us what to make of them. And the brain is where all of the neurology that impacts your physical sensations happens.

And a lot of what we experience, or at least what I experience as messages from my body are actually unhelpful responses from my brain. So let me give you this very concrete example. Like many people, I have some physical imbalances. I don't load my legs with my weight equally. That's what I have learned. And one of my hips has a more range of motion than the other.

My right hip does not like to go all the way to the right the way it should. Let me just pause and say I have a wonderful care team. I have all the resources in the world. Please do not write me emails with your recommendations about what to do for my hips. I am not offering this for diagnostic criteria. I'm just giving you a coaching metaphor.

Okay, so my right hip does not want to go all the way over. Because of that, my gate is a little bit fucked up. Sometimes more, sometimes less, and I have strain and pain in my legs and my hips from walking and running.

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For whatever reason, probably because of my hypermobility and attempting to hold everything together, my body has developed this compensatory pattern where my right hip doesn't have a full range of motion. So here's what's so fascinating. When I am pushed in physical therapy to move my right hip farther than my brain thinks is safe, my body freaks out.

But my brain is wrong about this. Because what's happening is not actually unsafe. I'm not trying to put my right hip somewhere that it physically can't go. I'm not trying to pop it out of the joint. I am not actually pushing it any place that is physically dangerous. It's not unsafe. But my brain decided at some point that restricting my right hip's motion was the way to stabilize and stay safe.

Now, this was unconscious obviously, but that's what my brain decided. And so when I push myself – let's be real, my physical therapist tells me, pushes me to push my right hip further out, my brain freaks the fuck out, and then my body freaks the fuck out.

And what's so ironic is that my brain has decided that it's unsafe to move my hip that way, but in fact, not moving my right hip fully has created way more problems than it ever solved, or at least way more problems than it's solving right now. It's not a literal physical limitation.

When I am told to, when I push it, can move that hip over. And it doesn't hurt in the sense of being like, pain like something's gone wrong. It doesn't hurt afterwards. It actually improves my range of motion. But while it's happening, my brain and my body are screaming that it hates it and I'm unsafe.

And it can be very intense. I have wanted to cry, again, not from pain, just from an up-swelling of emotion, of "feeling unsafe." But when I listen closely to my body, there's no pain, nothing has gone wrong. There's muscle working, which can be very intense. My muscles are working that aren't

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used to working. I'm totally physically safe. And my brain is yelling that if I move my right hip over, I'm going to die.

And for years, I listened to that and I believed it was true. And what I created for myself was a stronger and stronger pattern of not putting my hip where it should be because it felt safer not to. It's like a limiting belief in its own way, just in physical form.

On the plus side, I avoided feeling unsafe. But I also avoided learning how to correct it. I avoided creating more freedom and ease in my body. I avoided creating more movement. So many repercussions. I unknowingly gave up a lot just to avoid feeling that discomfort because I believed my brain when it told me that I was unsafe, when it told me that it was dangerous. And I believed my body when I had an up-swell of sensation or emotion that this was dangerous.

And that's what's so interesting to me that I think in some ways, all the messages I got from the wellness world about listening to and trusting my body, in this instance, they're well-meaning but they did not have a good result. And as I've watched my brain react to this experience, I see such a mirror of how a lot of us are with our thoughts.

So first what happens is my brain gets very angry that my trainer or my PT are trying to push me. So it wants them to just believe whatever I say about my abilities, really whatever my brain says. My brain is very mad that they don't agree with me that I can't move my right hip that way and that it would be dangerous if I did, and that my feeling unsafe means something is wrong.

And then my brain starts to feel sorry for itself. So it wants my trainer, my PT to acknowledge how hard this is. It wants them to indulge me and my drama and empathize with my suffering. It wants them to see that I am special and different and coddle me. It thinks I'm a special snowflake and

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they just don't understand how because of my specific body, I can't do it, other people can.

Of course, if they agreed with me about all of that, they would be totally useless to me. I would just be paying people to confirm my existing beliefs about my limitations. That would truly be a waste of my money and everyone's time.

And I want to be really clear when I say they push me. I don't mean that first of all, they don't physically push me, but also, I don't mean that they sort of don't care or don't listen to me. I mean that they stand outside of me and they see your right hip isn't moving over, I can see structurally you're okay, this is just your brain. I want you to try. And my brain is like, fuck you. You're so cruel and mean and horrible. Everything I think is true, I can't believe you're doing this.

It's just such a drama pity party in my brain. So fascinating. I am not obviously going to tell you listener to listen or not listen to your body. There's no rule. It's not always the same. I think for each of us, there are times we do want to listen to our bodies, signals of hunger and fullness when we're having an emotion we need to process, and that's not an exhaustive list. That's just two examples.

But I think we have to bring the discernment of our watcher's mind to interpreting those sensations too. Whether it's physical or "emotional" safety. Because our brains are not always doing us a favor when they try to keep us safe. Our brains are not always right about what is a danger to us. And your body does not exist independently of your brain.

What I have come to see is that my brain's response to changing my body patterns, to move in my hip, which seems like such a small thing is just like the reaction that many of us have to changing our brain patterns. Our current thoughts don't feel good, they're causing us suffering, they are

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limiting us, we know that. And yet we cling to them because we believe they are keeping us safe.

We believe that limitations that exist only in our mind are real in the world. And then we make them real for ourselves. My right hip is physically capable of moving farther over to the right, but my brain believes it shouldn't, so it doesn't. So I have made it come true for myself that my right hip can't move over more.

Now of course it can. Now that I know that I'm changing it. But because I believed that limitation and I didn't question it and I didn't want to feel "unsafe," my brain and body said when you move your hip that way it's very unsafe, and I listened to it, I have made that come true for myself.

What my body is actually capable of doing matters less than what my brain thinks it can do. I have been living as if my right hip was frozen in a certain position when actually more freedom was available to me at any time if only I had known to look for it and had had someone to show and tell me what I could do.

This is why I think that coaching is so important because when it's us, we don't even know what to look for. And that is the other wild thing about this. If you had asked me what my problem was before I went to PT, there's no way I would have thought that the problem was the range of motion in my right hip.

The sensation that was bothering me was in my left calf. That's what I thought I needed help with. Without that outside perspective, I would never have figured out what was really going on. So that expert guidance of coaching is so crucial to help you see from the outside what your pattern really is and whether or not your brain is telling you the truth about what you can do and what is safe and what you can change.

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And then you have to be willing to do the internal part. I have to be willing to listen to my brain screaming at me and accusing my trainer or my PT of trying to kill me and not caring, not understanding, and telling me to cancel everything and move to Oklahoma.

Most importantly, I actually have to be willing to feel unsafe. I have really been doing a lot of coaching on this recently. It always happens. Whatever is coming up for me I feel like is coming up for my clients too. And before this experience with my hip, the way I dealt with this was to mostly coach people around the idea of creating safety with their thoughts.

Emotional safety, which is where the feeling of safety comes from. So I do believe we create that feeling or that absence of fear with our thoughts, and it's totally worth doing. It is work worth doing to coach yourself to reduce that fear or increase that feeling of safety. Again, that's really just reducing the fear. It's just easier to talk about it like it's a feeling.

I think that that is good and worthy work to do, to realize that so much of what we fear is just our future thoughts and feelings, and to become comfortable with knowing that we don't have to fear those because we're going to manage them. I totally think that's worthwhile.

But at a deeper level now, after this work with my trainer and my PT and this hip, my greatest teacher right now, I also kind of think so what if we don't feel safe? And you know, it feels weird to say that, or my thought is that it's weird because I think there's a way in which today's wellness and feminist worlds, that's kind of like, heresy – maybe not heresy, but you're not supposed to say that we shouldn't care whether people, and especially women feel safe.

And obviously there's different kinds of safety we're talking about. But our experience of an emotion or physical sensation has so much to do with how we think about it. So for instance, there are studies suggesting that

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stress is only harmful to you if you think that stress is harmful. So what if feeling “unsafe,” what if feeling fear really is only terrible because we believe it means something that it doesn’t?

Your patterns have been keeping you feeling safe. So if you’re scared of what other people think, then you’re going to keep yourself small to try to avoid their judgment. So if you decide to do something big and bold, and whatever that means for you, you could try to coach yourself for months or years until you don’t feel fear. Or you can feel fear and be willing to do it anyway.

You can be scared to make more money than your parents did because you were taught that rich people are bad. So then you’re going to under-earn forever in order to not become that bad thing. And if you decide you want to change your relationship with money and earn at your potential by creating value and sharing that with the world, you can coach yourself forever until you feel safe doing it, or you could just be willing to do it scared.

If you felt unsafe as a child because of your family life, a lot of people did. But you’re not a child anymore. Those thoughts are only making you feel unsafe, creating that fear now in the present because you keep thinking them. I think we have to be really careful not to fondle our childhood or former thoughts and feelings. Not to elevate them into some kind of destiny or gaping wound that we have to tip-toe around so carefully, lest we ever feel afraid or feel unsafe.

And it’s so interesting because I think we are willing to embrace being afraid, or at least our inspirational quotes on Instagram do. Be afraid and do it anyway. But if we call it feeling unsafe, all of a sudden, we act like it’s an emotional emergency. So I think we have to be really careful about that.

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Safe is not a magic word. Our safety isn't necessarily important in the way we think it is. Our brains are not always good at determining what is dangerous or what is safe. Emotionally or physically really. Just because our primitive brain overvalues its own perception of safety over everything else doesn't mean we should let it set the agenda.

We have to use our prefrontal cortex, our rational mind to discern what truly constitutes danger or safety and when they are appropriate priorities and they are not. When they may be holding us back.

I was coaching a client about this today actually in Unf*ck Your Brain and I said to her, we hold ourselves back out of fear because we're like, I'm feeling the fear, this is terrible. Something's really gone wrong. But what if you thought you were having a heart attack and then a doctor was like, don't worry, it's just indigestion.

Now all of a sudden you might have the same physical sensation, but you don't think that you have to give up and lay down and die, or go to the hospital immediately and not do whatever you were supposed to do that day. You're just like oh, it's just indigestion. I can just take it with me.

Part of the reason our fear is so paralyzing is that we believe if we feel fear, we must be truly in danger. We believe that subconsciously. But what if that's not true?

You have to decide by looking at the result you get from a thought. And the real mind-blowing part of this is that believing you have to be safe, believing you need to feel safe, believing safety is very important, it actually makes you feel not safe. You mostly end up feeling afraid a lot because you're constantly being vigilant to see if something might be coming up that would make you feel not safe.

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So what if you didn't have to feel safe? What if am I safe was just the wrong question to be asking? If you haven't ascertained that you are not in immediate physical danger, you should ask yourself if you're safe if the house is on fire. I am not saying not to do that. But if you are not in immediate physical danger, I want to invite you to consider asking yourself a different question.

You get to decide what the question is. I think it's worth a try. Alright, that's it my chickens. Have a beautiful week. I'll talk to you next week.

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