

# UFYB 107: Dealing with Uncertainty



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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## UFYB 107: Dealing with Uncertainty

Welcome to *Unf\*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard law school grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello my chickens. How are you all? I am getting ready to head to Denver to host Clutch College. By the time this podcast comes out I will have just wrapped up and cannot wait to see how many mind-blowing breakthroughs my students are going to have and get to share with you all how it went.

I'm also inordinately excited about the tote bags we had made for our swag. They have amazing chicken designs on them. It's the little things. Very hip. Hip beautiful glamorous chickens.

Anyway, that's not the episode topic today, although that would be fun. Today we're going to talk about one of the human brain's least favorite things in the world, and that is uncertainty, which is also the nature of life.

Literally everything in life outside of us is uncertain and not subject to our control, and some of what happens inside of us is uncertain and not subject to our control. And yet we hate uncertainty with a passion and we go through elaborate mental gymnastics to try to avoid it, to pretend it doesn't exist, or to try to control it even though it can never be controlled.

And so today, I want to teach you what uncertainty is, why your brain hates it, and how to handle it. Because the one thing you can't do it just avoid it. So I'm not sure if I've talked about this before on the podcast but my last long-term relationship ended about a year ago and then I took some time off from dating to spend time with myself, which was amazing.

I highly recommend doing that if you have a history of always being in relationships, or just always dating and trying to be in relationships. And so now it's been a while, I'm starting to date again, so I'm learning how to handle uncertainty at a whole new level.

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I often compare dating and building a coaching business because they have some similarities in the way in which you have to be absolutely committed to believing in the possibility of your goal, even though it requires the participation of other people. And you can't even predict exactly who those people are going to be and what they're going to do.

And I really have this kind of handled and down in my business, so I no longer feel uncertainty about that, but as I'm starting to date again, I'm noticing that it feels a lot like when I was first building my business. When you're first building a business, you agonize over every potential client. And when you're dating with an unmanaged mind, you agonize over every date and every connection.

Now, I don't have that problem in dating either because - I used to, but I did a lot of this work before I met my last partner so I actually found thought work kind of right before and as I was meeting and starting to spend time with my last serious long-term partner. So that was, whatever that was, six, seven, eight years ago.

And I did a lot of work on my thoughts about dating then, so I don't have that. I remember what it was like but I don't generally have that problem anymore where I'm on an emotional roller coaster with every random person that I see once or twice, or before I've even met them.

But I'm now starting to see what it's like to spend more time with people and date people more consistently, and see how a deeper level of this uncertainty work is coming up for me again, which I'm sort of mentioning not only - I always try to be kind of transparent about my work with all of you because I want you to see that it's totally normal for patterns to come up at deeper and deeper levels.

It doesn't mean that you're not making progress or that nothing has changed. It used to be - like this kind of anxiety used to be debilitating for me and now it's not. It's huge, enormous progress that I can see. I used to

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take it so personally and think all my thoughts were true and act out about them and all kinds of stuff that no longer happens.

But that doesn't mean that I don't still encounter the same thought patterns in myself that I need to work at at a more subtle, a more refined, a more nuanced level. So I've been thinking a lot about uncertainty and how I deal with uncertainty and the differences between how I think about uncertainty or certainty in different parts of my life.

And so that's really what I want to share with you guys today because I think that a lot of you experience a lot of anxiety around uncertainty as well. So what is uncertainty? What do we mean by that? It literally means not being certain. Not being sure.

And I think for our brains, the scary kind of uncertainty is not knowing what will happen in the future. It's kind of a fear of the future. I think that on some level, we know that human life is nothing but uncertainty. The only real certainty is that we are alive right now and someday we will die. That's pretty much it.

Everything else around us could change at any moment. As could those states of being. So uncertainty is the natural state of life and existence and yet we fight it so hard. Because to our primitive brains, uncertainty means that you could die any minute, which is true. But your brain has evolved to try to avoid that at all costs.

And so we're terrified of uncertainty and we do whatever we can to avoid it. And I think the thing that we mostly do to try to avoid it is we make up stories in our own brains about how things will be, so that we can pretend we know what's coming.

Think about how much time you spend thinking about the future or worrying about what will come and trying to prepare for it. And all of that is because of your fear of the uncertain and the unknown. And in fact, we're so afraid

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of it that we would rather make ourselves miserable now with our worries and our fretting just so that we can think we're prepared to be miserable in the future.

We are constantly trying to control our bodies, control how we look, control what other people think and feel and do, control the environment around us, we're always trying to control our friends and our family, our loved ones, we're trying to control strangers and how loud they honk. Everything.

All because we fear the unknown and we fear uncertainty. But as with anything with thought work, we have to dig a bit deeper because what we're really fearing when we fear uncertainty isn't the actual circumstances that might happen. Circumstances never cause our feelings, so that's not what we're fearing.

What we fear is what we might think and feel in the future. We are terrified of uncertainty because we are uncertain about how we will think and feel in the future. And because we think that our thoughts and feelings just happen to us, that our experience of life comes from the outside, and so it feels uncontrollable and we fear not knowing what feelings are going to happen and when and why.

We're really afraid of our own minds and bodies. We're afraid of the thoughts we may have and the sensations we're going to feel. Most of us wouldn't say we go around being terrified every time someone suggest that at some point in the future we might have a headache or get the flu.

But we are terrified of the suggestion from ourselves or anyone else that we might feel sad or anxious or guilty or afraid in the future. So the bottom-line thing to remember is that our fear of uncertainty is just a fear of what thought we might have, depending on what happens, and what feeling we would experience.

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We're afraid of uncertainty because we don't know which ones are coming, and so we don't think we can prepare for them, or we don't want to have them at all. And yet all of life is uncertain. Even our attempts at creating certainty.

We sign legal contracts, we make marriage vows, we promise ourselves and each other things, we tell ourselves and each other stories about what life is going to be like. They're all illusions. We can be certain about how we will show up for ourselves and in our own lives most of the time, but that's about it.

And even that is sometimes beyond our control. We may get injured, we may get ill, our brain chemistry may change, whatever could happen to us. So what is the solution to this conundrum that we are terrified of change and uncertainty and yet everything is uncertain? We have to get comfortable with the discomfort of uncertainty.

And the first step, as with any emotion, is just allowing it. We don't like to be uncomfortable so we think we need to resolve any negative emotion we're having immediately, and I see this even with my students sometimes. They learn thought work, they start to kind of apply what I teach, they join The Clutch, they join the coaching model, and then they're trying to use that to immediately change any negative emotion they have.

That's never the answer. We always have to allow the emotion first. If the nature of life is uncertainty and the human brain is uncomfortable with uncertainty, then it's a good bet that even with a managed mind, sometimes you're going to experience discomfort or anxiety about uncertainty, and that's okay. It's only a problem if we believe we should never have to feel that way. It's only a problem if we believe we're entitled to not feel that.

One of the thoughts I've been using a lot though the process of building new relationships or anything else in my life, like building my business,

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launching The Clutch, anything that is uncomfortable and stretches me, I've been practicing the thought, "This is how it's supposed to feel," which I think is so funny, especially in relationships and dating because you hear a lot of kind of faux empowerment about dating that sort of has the tenure of relationships should just feel easy and comfortable and you shouldn't feel anxious and you shouldn't feel afraid, and if it's hard, you're with the wrong person.

But it's your brain that creates those thoughts and feelings and makes it hard. And if you have a brain that doesn't like uncertainty, then you're probably going to experience some discomfort because just like building a business or parenting or many other things, dating involves a lot of uncertain outcomes that have to do with how someone other than you is going to think and feel and act in ways you can't control.

So if you have a brain that hates uncertainty and gets anxious about it, it's just a fantasy to think that there's a person or a job or a version of your child or whatever else that will prevent you from having to grapple with those thoughts and feelings.

So when I think, this is how it's supposed to feel, I'm reminding myself that nothing has gone wrong. Growth and evolution sometimes feel like anxiety and doubt. And opening yourself up to love sometimes feel like having the fear of loss. Trying to achieve success has to feel like having the chance of failure. It's the contrast of emotion and it all goes together.

So once you've done that, once you have allowed that emotion and accepted it's okay for you to feel anxiety or fear about uncertainty, you can start to dig into what's really causing it. If your fear around uncertainty is around what you will think and feel in the future, you have to start figuring out what that's about.

What thoughts do you imagine you will have and what feeling do you imagine you will be experiencing? What's so interesting to me is that when



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I dig into uncertainty and anxiety with my clients, it so often turns out that what they are fearing they will think is something about themselves. It's a mean thought about themselves.

They're fearing the way they'll blame themselves for whatever happens, and that's why they can't escape that fear. Because if you've set up your brain to blame yourself for circumstances outside of you or to shame yourself for your own thoughts and feelings, then it doesn't matter what outcome you imagine. You'll fear that experience.

When this was happening with something in my own life recently and I dug into it in my self-coaching, I realized I was having the thought, if x, y, z happens, or if this outcome happens, then what am I going to think? I was imagining I would feel terrible, and then when I looked into what would the thought be, I realized that I was imagining that I would think, "See, I knew something was wrong and I should have trusted my gut."

That was the root of it. I was so terrified that I would have that thought about myself and blame myself. And so it was so interesting to ask myself, so what? Why would it matter? Let's say I did have an idea about something and then it turned out to be true. So what? Why is that a problem?

I realized that I was thinking that I needed to know what was going to happen, that it was important to know what the outcome was going to be. And that if I guessed wrong, I was going to blame myself. Or that if it turned out that my original idea was right and I went a different way, then I was going to shame myself about it and tell myself that I should have trusted myself.

I should have trusted myself sounds like the sort of positive thought, but it's really not. It's actually just shaming and blaming yourself for not always going with your anxieties. Whatever random thought you're having. The



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core problem was that I thought I needed to know what was going to happen.

So I was constantly trying to evaluate the “evidence” - of course, the evidence is all just my own thoughts. It’s like my brain produced a bunch of toy soldiers and then was like, now we have to categorize these, as if they were real, even though I just made them up. So I was constantly trying to evaluate all the “evidence,” just my own thoughts, to predict the future one way or another.

So I would convince myself everything was one way but then I couldn’t be sure of that, so I would convince myself everything was a totally different way, but then that felt terrible. And so I’d try to convince myself that it was okay, again, that it would come out this other first way just to get away from the negative feeling.

It was this endless cycle and I think a lot of us have experienced that, of analyzing and reanalyzing the “evidence,” which is not real evidence, it’s just your thoughts, just thinking it in different ways over and over, trying to convince ourselves it’s one or the other. But neither one is ever fully satisfying because we can’t know because the future is uncertain.

And it usually happens - in this situation, of course what happened was it turned out that what was actually going on was something I hadn’t even imagined. Because I was just doing my “analysis” within the confines of my own brain. What I thought of, which had actually nothing to do with reality.

But even before I found out that I just wasn’t even on the right page, the way that I was able to get myself out of this back and forth and back and forth was when I finally questioned the idea that it would be better for me to know the outcome ahead of time. That was the belief that was underlying all of the anxiety and that’s the belief that underlies all the anxiety around uncertainty.

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It's that it would feel better if we just knew what was coming. So why do I need to know the outcome ahead of time? That's the question I started asking myself. The only reason that I would need to know the outcome ahead of time was if I was going to leave myself at the mercy of my unmanaged mind.

If I know that I'm willing to feel any emotion and that I can choose what to think and feel no matter what happens, then there's nothing to fear. There's no reason that I need to know what's going to happen. I only need to know what's going to happen if I think that one outcome is better than another and that my thoughts and feelings are going to depend on the outcome, rather than on me managing my mind.

And if I'm willing to feel any emotion and I know I can choose what to think and feel, then I don't have to be trying to avoid any particular outcome. And that might include negative emotion, which is so important to understand. If I choose to feel negative emotion, if a certain outcome happens, even so, even if I'm predicting negative emotion, it stops being something to fear because it's not something that's going to happen against my will.

I'm not resisting it; I'm not telling myself that those negative emotions have to happen to me. I'm saying if this outcome happens, I want to feel these negative emotions. Part of the human experience. Like if I lose someone I love, I want to feel those. So I don't have to fear that they're going to happen to me. I know that I'm going to be creating them.

So when I think I need to know the outcome ahead of time I'm assuming that I know what the best outcome is. So I want to know am I going to get the good outcome or am I going to get the bad outcome? And if I'm going to get the bad outcome, then at least I'll know what negative thoughts and feelings I'm going to have.

I'm just assuming that there's a better and worse and that my thoughts and feelings are just going to happen to me. And I assume the way I figure

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which outcome I think is better than the other is just by how I imagine they will feel. Let's say that again because it's so important. It's the kind of thing you could easily just kind of nod and gloss over, but it's everything.

When I feel anxiety about uncertainty, it's because I think I need to know what's going to happen. And when I think I need to know what's going to happen, my implicit assumption is that some things that could happen would be better than other things. If all the things that could happen to me are equally wonderful, then I don't feel like I need to know what's going to happen.

And probably if all the things that could happen are all equally terrible, then I also probably don't need to know which one's going to happen. It's only if I think well, some would be better than others and I want to know, so I know whether I can feel happy now or whether I have to feel bad now imagining it.

But the whole way that I imagine which outcome is better than another is just based on what I currently imagine I will feel. It's the unconscious thoughts and feelings that I'm predicting I will have. How I evaluate which outcome is better than another, I am doing that by evaluating how I imagine they'll feel when I think about them now.

But that imagination of how they will feel is just based on my unmanaged mind. It's just me thinking, oh, if I get fired from this job, I will feel ashamed. So obviously getting fired, it would obviously be better to not get fired. That's how it happens when I'm in this moment trying to predict what's going to happen so I don't have to feel uncertainty and believing that one outcome is better, not getting fired, but that evaluation is just based on my prediction that it will feel bad if I'm fired, so that must be the worst outcome.

But that analysis is totally wrong, right? Because I don't have to know what the outcome is because my thoughts and feelings don't just happen to me. If I know I'm in charge of what I think and feel no matter what, and that I

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can choose that ahead of time, even without knowing the outcome, then I have nothing to fear. I don't have to know what the outcome is.

All I have to know is that I'm going to manage my mind. And that allows so much more openness and curiosity to come up for me. Because rather than assuming that I do know the better outcome based on what I'm afraid to feel right now basically, I can decide that whatever happens is the better outcome.

When I look back on my life, there are so many things that felt super painful at the time. Professional mistakes, relationships ending, family dynamics, so many things that at the time I thought were the worst possible outcome. And now I don't wish they were different. I'm glad that they happened because I have chosen how to think and feel about those things and to love them as part of my journey because I have chosen to love where I am now.

Every stage of my life has been better than the last because I have decided to believe it is. This isn't tricking myself because there's no objective thing as better or worse. It is always just a human mind that evaluates something and decides to think it's better or worse.

So why not choose to believe it's better? When I think about everything in the past being part of my journey to today, then I can see how no matter what happens today or in the future, that will also be part of my journey. And since at any point I can decide to love my journey on purpose, suddenly I don't have to know what will happen. It doesn't matter.

I can be curious about what will happen and actually just interested to see how my life is going to unfold because I already know how I've decided to think and feel about it. I can decide on purpose what I will believe ahead of time no matter the actual outcome.

So if I decide on purpose to always believe that whatever outcome happens will turn out to be the best one because of whatever happens after

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it and what I learn from it and how I grow and how I decide to love that version of my life, now all of a sudden it doesn't matter which the outcome is. There's no reason for me to feel anxious about uncertainty.

If you work with the self-coaching model that I teach, if you're in The Clutch or you've learned it from me in some other way, then you know that our thoughts create our results. So just think about how that applies here. If you assume you know what will happen, you make that outcome a certainty for yourself.

Whatever the external circumstances are, you guarantee you will have the internal experience for yourself that you're imagining. If you think that things are going to be terrible, then you're going to have a terrible experience no matter what's happening outside of you.

But if you're curious, then that's the result you produce. Curiosity, openness, the ability to perceive things more clearly and with less cognitive bias. You're no longer trying to force the journey to a particular destination. But nor are you giving up and just taking your hands off the wheel and resigning yourself to your fate. You're just present. You're awake. You're curious. You're alive.

If you are curious to see what unfolds but you're not afraid of any particular outcome, then you don't have to fear uncertainty. You can just be present and see what happens. That's the only state we're ever trying to get to anyway. The only thing we want is to be present with our own experience, present in our own lives in real time, and to experience the beauty of that.

Living our life the way it really is now and loving that process. The only certainty you need is that you can manage your mind no matter what happens and that you can love whatever life you have. And when you know that, then there are no risks you're not willing to take. There are no experiences you're not willing to show up for. There's no life you're not willing to have, and there's no moment you're not willing to be present with.

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And that is the one thing of which you can be certain. Alright my chickens, that's it for this week. Have a beautiful week. Manage your minds and I'll see you next week.

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