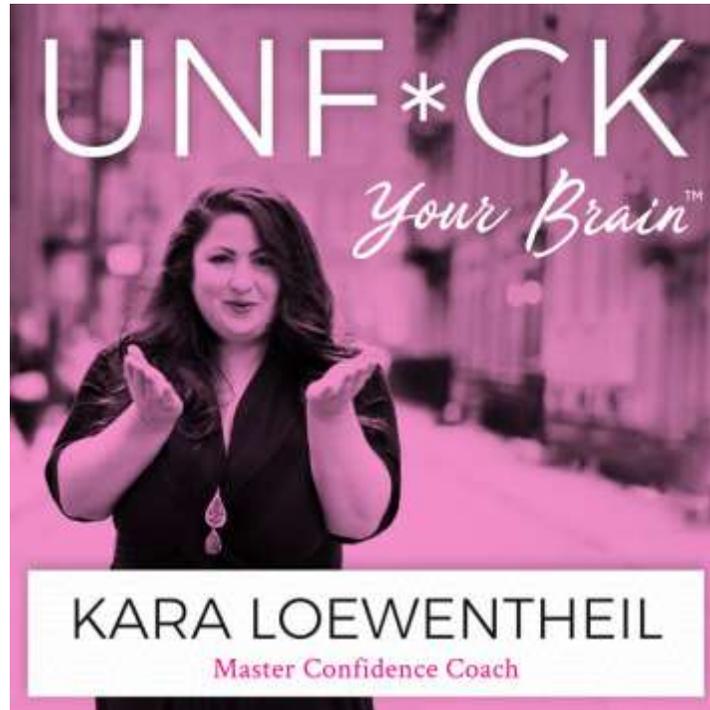


UFYB 110: Dating, Perfectionism & Anxious Attachment



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? Is everybody ready for the holiday season? I'm recording this right before Thanksgiving. I don't know whether it's because it's cuffing season or what, it's just very cold in New York, but I feel like I have been doing a ton of coaching on dating recently and I've been doing some of this work myself and really doing a lot of reading and self-coaching about it.

And so today, I want to take a deeper dive into something that I've addressed briefly in a previous episode. So on the episode about kind of personality tests, I talked also about attachment theory. And I'm going to dig more into attachment theory in this podcast today.

And I always like to preface this by saying it's all just thoughts. Some people believe in attachment theory, some people maybe don't. I think that some of the patterns that attachment theory describes are brain patterns that I recognize in myself and other people, and in this episode, I kind of want to teach you how I think about those patterns and where I think the kind of traditional view of them is useful and then where I think it kind of misses the mark.

So I'm going to focus mostly on anxious attachment and how I see it relating to perfectionism and all or nothing, black and white thinking. Because that's an area that I don't see the literature on attachment theory addressing as much and if you listen to the podcast, and especially if you're in *The Clutch* and doing this work with me, you probably have some of those patterns.

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I also want to talk about how patriarchy and the socialization of women fits into attachment theory, which again, is not so much addressed by the kind of mainstream books that you're likely to have read about it. So this is kind of attachment theory the *Unf*ck Your Brain* way.

So let's start with the basics of attachment theory as they're traditionally explained. Attachment theory refers to the theory that as children, we develop attachment systems that govern our relationship to our caregivers. So basically, what makes a baby cry hysterically when its mother leaves the room, and then calm down when she comes back.

That's its attachment system that is developed to keep its caregivers around and taking care of it. And the theory is these same patterns influence and shape and can be seen in our relationship as adults, especially with our romantic partners, although not only with our romantic partners.

And it's not theorized to be necessarily like an exact one to one. Your attachment style as an infant is not always exactly how your attachment style as an adult will be. But they're often connected. The theory is that your experience as a child and how reliable your caregivers are at meeting your needs, and potentially some of just whatever wiring you're kind of born with impacts your attachment style. And then also your relationships as an adult can impact your attachment style as well if you're in long-term relationships that activate different patterns.

So there are a couple of different ways of diagramming the different attachment styles and some of them are kind of more nuanced than others, and some of them talk more about a scale, whereas some of them talk more about categories. But the three basic types are considered to be secure attachment, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment.

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And then most theories also say that there is a subtype of anxious avoidant, which nobody really talks about quite as much. Much smaller portion of the population. I'm not going to talk about it that much in this podcast either.

There are also theories that break these down into different kinds of anxious and avoidant. You can always dig into the literature if you really want to get into that. I don't think it's that necessary or useful. But here's the basic kind of overview.

So people who have anxious attachment styles tend to be preoccupied with fears of being abandoned or rejected. So they tend to worry a lot about their partner losing interest in them or their partner changing their mind about the relationship or the partner leaving them. They often experience jealousy and anxiety in a relationship.

And their reaction to these fears, when these fears are activated, is to try to reestablish closeness and intimacy. And they may use what are called protest behaviors, like calling or texting your partner excessively, or acting out in the relationship, or playing games to try to manipulate the partner into reassuring them.

People who have avoidant attachment styles also experience kind of psychological distress around relationships, but rather than worry about losing intimacy, they worry about losing autonomy and independence. They see relationships as being threats to their independence, and so they tend to react to closeness and intimacy or a bid by a partner for closeness and intimacy by wanting to create space and distance.

One of the things I think is interesting is I would say that the literature more often talks about people who have avoidant attachment styles as feeling kind of shut down and distant. In my experience, there are people, and maybe this is the anxious avoidance, but who begin to feel fairly anxious

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about intimacy and then the way that they feel better is by creating distance.

So not necessarily that they already feel shut down and distant, but that they start to feel anxious and then the way that they can fix that anxiety is to get distance, whereas someone with anxious attachment, the way they want to fix that anxiety is to get more and more closeness.

So anxious avoidant, and then people who have secure attachment styles are comfortable with intimacy and with interdependence, but they also maintain independence. They're not isolated, but they're not codependent either. They're neither anxious nor avoidant. They basically are comfortable in relationships and with intimacy and don't have a problem. That's essentially the idea.

So it's common for an anxiously attached person and an avoidantly attached person to end up in a relationship together, which produces a classic kind of push-pull dynamic, with the anxious partner sensing the avoidance, responding to it with attempts to escalate intimacy, which of course the avoidant partner recognizes and then feels even more avoidant about.

So if you experience a lot of anxiety in romantic relationships, especially early on, you worry a lot about the other person changing their mind, rejecting you, not liking you anymore, being interested in other people, then you're more likely anxiously attached.

If you find intimacy and closeness uncomfortable, makes you feel either shut down and distant, or you sort of often are maybe early on infatuated but then kind of lose interest in people, or you're anxious in a way that's assuaged only by separation and independence, you're more likely avoidantly attached.

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And if you don't experience much anxiety around relationships, you find it fairly easy to be in intimate romantic partnerships, you're more likely securely attached. Of course, these things are spectrums. That was a four-minute overview. Some theories have subtypes. You can find tests online or in books if you want to dig more into it.

The classic book that often gets recommended is called Attached, but I personally prefer the book Anxious in Love. The book Attached mostly suggests that the solution is to find a securely attached person to be in a relationship with. And in my world, that's just changing your circumstance.

And I don't really believe that it's so effective on its own. I think the book Anxious in Love brings in more mindfulness and more cognitive change strategies. The author of that one is Becker-Phelps or Phelps-Becker. One of those.

So anyway, I'm not saying that you should go out and read those books. If you are doing thought work, if you're in The Clutch, we can work on this in The Clutch, and if you're doing thought work, I recommend you listen to this podcast and kind of use what I'm applying here. But if you do want to dig into it, if you Google, the first thing you're going to get is the book Attached, and I recommend finding the book, Anxious in Love by Becker-Phelps. That's my preferred version.

So anyway, one thing that both books and lots of books about attachment theory often note is that more women than men tend to be anxiously attached, and more men tend to be avoidant. And this is often just mentioned as like, kind of oh, just little good to know kind of factoid.

But I think it's a crucial aspect of what creates these thought patterns and it's too easily overlooked if you aren't bringing a political analysis to the work. Because I don't think it's a coincidence that more women are anxiously attached and more men are avoidant.

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Think about how men and women are socialized to think about romance and sexuality and partnerships in a heteronormative society. Women are taught to think that having a romantic partner, especially a man, if they're straight, is the most important thing in the world. It's what we're told is what makes us worthy and valuable.

We are taught our entire lives to care a lot what men think of us. Even men we barely know. And especially men who may be evaluating our sexual potential or our sexual attractiveness, or our potential as a mate. So success in romantic love for women is defined as getting a man to validate them by committing to them. Raising them from the ranks of this desperately searching single to the chosen and exulted. That's the story.

Yeah, it's 2019 and we are getting better about teaching women to care about more than their relationship status, but it hasn't been that long that we've even talked about anything else. It's been like, 50, 70 years at most since we started shifting away from the idea that the height of a woman's life was to get married.

And if you look at the multi-billion-dollar bridal industry, or the self-help aisle on finding a man in the bookstore, you can see this message is alive and well. It is still out there and we are still absorbing it.

So think about it that way. If you were taught that the most important thing about you is your appearance and your attractiveness as a mate, and if you were taught that if you aren't chosen by a man for a romantic relationship, then you're not as good as women who are and there's something wrong with you, how do you think you're going to feel about romantic relationships?

You're going to feel pretty fucking anxious. If you had experience with kind of inconsistent caregiving on a physical or an emotional level as a child, of course, that's also probably a play that's going to exacerbate it, but even if

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you didn't, I think that socialization as a woman in this society is enough to predispose you to this kind of attachment pattern.

And meanwhile, men are taught that women are constantly trying to trap them into marriage or trap them in relationships, that somehow as a man, they shouldn't want to be in one and that women are always trying to trick them, that women all want to be in relationships with them, and that having feelings is unmanly.

So it's no surprise I don't think that more men than women react to intimacy with avoidance. If we valorize the lone wolf and the strong silent man, of course it's going to make it harder for men to handle intimacy and vulnerability, and it's going to of course set them up to be triggered by a woman's anxious attachment style.

I'm obviously being extremely heteronormative in the way I'm talking about this but that's for a reason. Obviously, there are people of every gender identity who display any of these attachment styles. It's not all socialization. Some of it is the way you're raised as a child, some of it may just be your wiring, some of it may be significant relationships you had as an adult.

But I don't think it's an accident that taken at a broad level, there is a gender breakdown in the types of attachment styles. And I don't think that we talk enough about the gender socialization angle in this context.

And the reason I think that's important, it's not just to be aware of it, but also because it gives you another hook for working on these patterns. Because it's one thing to blame it on your upbringing, which is over and done with, and you can work on changing those thoughts. And I have done this work.

But as with anything, when we blame how we are now on what happened when we were six months old, it feels hard to access and change. We

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weren't even conscious of our thoughts back then. But we can see very clearly the way that socialization impacts these patterns.

And so if we do the work on self-worth and self-acceptance and self-value, with that feminist frame in mind, we can see a way of shifting our attachment partners by changing our thoughts about what we need and want from relationships and why. So it's important, I think, to understand where it's coming from because it gives you another angle to work on it.

The other aspect that I don't think is discussed enough is the way that perfectionism and black and white thinking contribute to particularly, an anxious attachment style. So when you think about it, perfectionism and anxiety go hand in hand. The belief that things should be perfect, or that you have to be perfect is the hallmark of perfectionism.

If you listen to the podcast, or you're doing this work with me in The Clutch, you know that this relates really closely to your ideas about your own self-worth. Because we think we need to be perfect in order to be worthy and to be loved. And what is more of a place to run into that fear head on than in a romantic relationship?

And again, I'm talking more about romantic relationships because they tend to bring out the most intense crisis of these kinds of thought patterns, but for sure, people experience these attachment issues in their family relationships and with their friends sometimes.

If you worry a lot that your friends are not going to love you anymore, are going to abandon you, are going to change their minds about you, if you get very insecure and jealous about your friendships, same patterns. This applies to you. But I do think there's something about romantic and intimate relationships that really brings this up for people.

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And when you're intimate with someone, you are always going to end up having to be vulnerable and human and messy and not perfect. And by vulnerable, I really mean being seen in your not-perfectness. Not that someone else will cause your feelings, but that you have to allow yourself to be seen as not perfect.

You're going to fuck up, you're going to snap at someone, you're going to say the wrong thing, you're going to act out of a negative feeling, or whatever else is going to happen. But if you're a perfectionist, you're constantly judging and rejecting yourself just for being a human, and so you assume that everyone else does too, which means when you start getting intimate with someone, you project onto them your own constant evaluating and analyzing and rejecting of yourself.

If you are constantly cataloguing your own faults, you will assume that your partner is constantly cataloguing your faults too. If you are constantly looking at other people and thinking about how they're more attractive and more fun and more smart than you are, then you're going to assume that your partner is doing that and thinking that about you and other people too.

All of the anxiety you create for yourself with your thoughts about yourself, you then project onto and pin onto your partner. And then you want your partner to reassure you about something they can't possibly fix because it's your own thoughts about yourself.

And when you tend towards perfectionist black and white thinking, you also don't have much of a sense of healthy boundaries. And I don't mean boundaries in the way I teach boundaries of decisions you'll make about when to remove yourself or how to act in certain situations. I kind of mean more - not even boundaries, but a sense of healthy balance or limits or just how to construct a relationship that you want.

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I think when you have black and white perfectionist thinking, when it's all or nothing and you have anxious attachment patterns, so you're constantly wanting reassurance and validation, and your brain is constantly creating more anxiety that you then want reassurance and validation about, you don't really know how to take it slow.

You don't know how to gradually develop a relationship and integrate it into your life. You either love people and you want to be with them all the time or you hate them and want to reject them. And one of the things that I have been thinking about as I've been coaching on this recently and doing my own work is that I love how coaching encourages us to see why we've chosen something and how it's working for us.

And I think something that literature doesn't really talk about but that I see is the way in which a perfectionist with anxious attachment is going to subconsciously pick someone with avoidant attachment patterns. Not just because it activates their kind of anxiety and they get caught in the cycle, but also because when you are a black and white thinker and when you are a perfectionist and when you are an all or nothing thinker, you don't know how to moderate yourself.

And you're terrified about making your own decisions because you're always worried you're going to make the wrong one. If you're a black and white thinker, you just always want more. More is better. More food, buy more clothes, have more sex, have more pleasure.

Or it's total restriction, rejection, and shutdown. We only have two settings, if that's the way that we think. And in relationships I think we're like this too. We're either all in and we love someone, or if we start having any fears or doubts, then we're consumed with anxiety and worry, or we want to shut down and totally reject them and we're very angry.

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It's all very extreme. I think the beauty of choosing an avoidant partner if you're anxious is that the avoidant partner sets all the limits for you. You don't have to figure out how much you actually like the person or how much you actually want to see them or what kind of relationship you want to have or how to integrate it into your life.

You just keep wanting more and they set all the limits. When you're used to constantly rejecting yourself and judging yourself by what other people think you should want and how other people react to you, this pattern feels totally comfortable. You just constantly are trying to get validation and reassurance and they are constantly rejecting you.

The hilarious joke that the universe plays and the reason that I don't think the answer is as simple as just dating someone with secure attachment style is that when you do date someone with a secure attachment style, it's like encountering emotional sobriety.

You have to so clearly and sometimes painfully see how much you are creating all of this drama in your own brain and how much work you have to do to figure out what kind of relationship you want, when it's not just based on a constant chase for validation and reassurance.

If you read the literature, you'd think that most anxious or avoidantly attached people just haven't encountered someone secure yet that they can date, and that would change their attachment style. But I think people with anxious and avoidant attachment often reject securely attached people because they're addicted to the drama of anxiety and relief.

One of the things I work on a lot with my clients is how to discern if you like someone and what a romantic relationship should be like when you've stepped off the roller coaster of just using your dating life as a way to constantly punish yourself, seek reassurance and validation, get a brief high, plummet off the high, start the process all over again.

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And I have seen this when I have done this work on my own brain, how no matter how well something was going, my brain would try to manufacture a crisis or a problem or a thing to worry about, or a thing to try to get the other person to do or agree to so that I could set up a new test. And then I could worry about whether we would pass it or the other person would go for it and then I could either feel elated momentarily or dejected, and then start that process all over again.

This is such intensive work because it requires working on your own thoughts about yourself, your own self-worth and value. But then as I've been discovering in my own life lately, even after you do all that and you could have a different, more evolved kind of relationship, you have to do all the work on encountering yourself more honestly in that relationship and seeing all the ways that you still have to grow.

And you also still have work to do on the kind of habits your brain has created with all of the kind of thoughts that make up your attachment style. Your brain has developed those along the way. It's like a big grab bag of fun that feels like dying. Just like all the best growth opportunities.

So if this episode sounds like your experience, I want you to know that there is nothing inherently wrong with you. It's also not the case that there's no one good out there or online dating doesn't work or everyone you can ever date is terrible, or that you're not good enough. None of that. You just don't know how to function in intimate relationships in a sane way yet. And there are multiple levels of this work to do.

So I want to encourage you to come join The Clutch and we will get to work on this. I have a dating stress bonus that you get in week six after you join, and I do a lot of coaching on these topics on the live calls and the bonus podcasts we do every week, and there are a lot of people on the Facebook group working through these issues.

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I think especially with dating, it is so easy to get into an echo chamber with your other single friends where either they're helping you micro analyze every little thing, which is not helpful for you, trying to read the tea leaves, very focused on what the other person is thinking or doing, or everyone just agrees dating is terrible and everybody just agrees there's no one good out there and it's so horrible.

Or sometimes what happens is if your friends are all in relationships then you kind of isolate to yourself and you don't talk about these things and you just focus on how you must be bad and wrong and different from everybody else. So none of that shit is helpful. You need a supportive community that is unpacking the same patterns and working on growing in this area. Not just complaining to each other.

That is what The Clutch is for. So if finding a partner is on your 2020 bucket list or your 2030 bucket list, for that matter, it's time to get started now. www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. And in the meantime, I will talk all of you chickens next week.

If you're loving what you're learning in the podcast, you have got to come check out The Clutch. The Clutch is the podcast community for all things *Unf*ck Your Brain*. It's where you can get individual help applying the concepts to your own life.

It's where you can learn new coaching tools not shared on the podcast that will blow your mind even more, and it's where you can hang out and connect over all things thought work with other podcast chickens just like you and me. It's my favorite place on earth and it will change your life, I guarantee it. Come join us at www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. It's [unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). I can't wait to see you there.