

UFYB 111: Listener Q&A - Work + Self-Regard



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? I am excited to do a listener Q&A episode. I've gotten such an amazing buildup of questions and I don't know why, but it just seems like the right thing to do around the holidays. I feel like there are questions that have been coming in all year, and so we're going to answer them in a few episodes over the next few weeks.

And I've kind of organized them. I do always recommend that you, if you're into this work, listen to all the episodes, and that oftentimes, when we think that we know what topic we want coaching on, we're actually wrong about what the problem is. Because if you think about it, topics are kind of like circumstances, and it's never actually the circumstance that's the problem.

So this is part of why group coaching is so effective and powerful in a way that people often don't predict or understand until they've experienced it. Because you might think like, "Oh, well this person wants to get coached on work and I don't have any problems at work," but it'll turn out that that person's thoughts about themselves at work are like, exactly the same as the thoughts you have about being around your family or in romantic relationships or in your hobby or something else, or as a parent.

It's our thoughts. Not the topic. Not the circumstance that makes the difference. So all that being said though, I have kind of collected these. I don't usually do it this way, but I've collected these into kind of broad topic areas just because I think sometimes it's interesting to answer a couple of different questions about the same circumstance in a way that kind of helps you see that it's all just thoughts.

So this episode and the next couple of Q&A episodes will kind of have these topic-y groupings, but I definitely recommend that you listen to all of

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them and think about how these things do apply to you, even if the topic or the circumstance is different.

So first question was, “How do you deal with a firm that feels like high school? Cliques, bullies, rumors. Oh my.” So the answer to this is you deal with your own brain. A firm doesn’t feel like high school. You have the thought that the firm is like high school. Then you have the thought that there are cliques, and you have the thought that there are bullies, and you have the thought that there are rumors.

None of those are circumstances. None of those are true objective things that just exist like gravity. Those are all your thoughts about how the different human bodies in your workplace are interacting with each other. So what we know for sure from this question is that the person asking it feels like they’re in high school, and probably they’re having the same thoughts they had in high school, which is why they’re having that experience.

So the question is never - this is sort of a shortcut for all of you guys. The question is never how do I deal with this circumstance? The question is always how do I deal with my own thoughts? How do I deal with my own brain? What is my brain telling me right now?

So when you think that your firm feels like high school, that’s a thought, not a feeling that you’re having and you need to look at just that thought by itself. When you think this firm feels like high school, how do you feel? And then how do you behave? And kind of, what results do you create for yourself?

Even that thought itself is probably getting in your way. And then when you add that you think there are - certain people are in a clique and certain other people are bullies and people are starting rumors, you’re actually kind of in that high school mentality yourself, thinking about the firm like it’s a

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high school, assigning people to different groups that you thought existed in high school. You're the one creating that experience for yourself.

So you have to really get some ownership over your thoughts here and start to really differentiate between your thoughts and the external circumstances that are neutral, of what's actually happening. So that is the answer to that.

Someone else asked a question about work, which was, "How to manage your mind when your supervisor's evaluation doesn't match your new positive outlook." So this is such an interesting question because it sort of implies what I think a lot of us would think would happen, which is if we manage our minds and we start to feel more positive and take more action in our lives, that other people are going to see that and validate it and reciprocate it.

And sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. Because your supervisor's evaluation is just their thoughts about you. And people struggle so much with evaluations because we make them mean so much. In fact, if you struggle with evaluations, you should go back. I have a whole episode on this from the pre-*Unfuck Your Brain* days, when the podcast was *The Lawyer Stress Solution*.

And so it's focused on mid-year, I think, firm reviews, but what I'm teaching applies to any kind of evaluation or review. So it's all in the same podcast. If you just scroll all the way back, you'll find it. So I did a whole episode about this.

But I think the important thing to remember is that an evaluation is just someone else's thoughts about you. And you get to think about those and consider them and decide if you agree with them and decide if you want to change your behavior because of them. You get to think about those with your own critical lens and decide what to do about it.

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So it's not a problem inherently that your supervisor's evaluation isn't what you think it should be, whatever the reason. You get to decide, you get to see, what are you making that mean? Why is that a problem? What do you think the evaluation should be and why? And then how do you want to handle it?

But just because a supervisor gives you an evaluation doesn't mean - those observations of you could be accurate or helpful, or they could be inaccurate and unhelpful. You always get to decide. But when you are believing that your supervisor should think a certain way about you, then you're not able to receive feedback and see what you want to think about it because you're defensive.

Alright, so that's that question about evaluations. And next question. These are all kind of - not all super related, but they have things in common. Anyway, okay, next question. Somebody asked, "How do I quit my teaching job if I rely on health insurance from said job? The job itself will kill me..."

Okay, so unless you are teaching murderers, the job itself will not kill you. You can see that there's a lot of drama here in the way you're thinking about this. "The job itself is going to kill me." I don't think you mean literally. Even if you just mean because it's so much stress, stress is caused by the way you're thinking about your job. Not your job.

And the studies show that stress is only harmful if you think it's harmful. It's fascinating. Brains are really, really wild, you guys. So we have two parts to this. You're telling yourself that the job will kill you, which is why you want to quit it, but then you're telling yourself you need the health insurance from it so you can't quit.

So you've got yourself in a Catch 22. You've basically told yourself you're going to die if you quit because you won't have health insurance, but you're going to die if you stay, so no wonder you feel stuck. And you have to start

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to deconstruct both parts of that. But I would start with your thoughts about your job.

Because the reason you want to quit your job is because you think it's going to kill you, but of course, that's an optional thought that your job is going to kill you. And all the thoughts you have about your job and how it's so stressful and why you hate it so much and why you want to quit, those are all the things that are making you want to quit.

So we don't know yet if you need to quit. Your question assumes, oh well, it would be good for me to quit, but I need the health insurance. But I don't think that we know that it's good for you to quit. All we know is that you have some negative thoughts about your job. And I don't think that you're actually in danger of being killed.

I could be wrong, but you did call it a teaching job. You're not like, I'm a Navy Seal or, I don't know, I teach jumping out of airplanes without parachutes or something. So you're asking yourself the wrong question. The question is what kind of work do I need to do to manage my mind around this job so that I am not stressing myself out constantly with my own thinking, and so that I am not creating all of this stress for myself that I then want to quit the job to get away from.

Then you'll be able to think about whether you want to be in this job or some other job, and how important the health insurance is and for what reasons. But you can't figure out any of that right now because you're assuming that it's true that the job is going to kill you and so you need to quit, and that's making you feel insane. And then you can't think about the rest of it clearly.

Any time you tell yourself that you're kind of trapped by something, you're going to set off like, a lot of panic and anxiety that's going to make it very difficult for you to think clearly. That's just kind of a rule of brains.

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Alright, someone else asked, “As a freelance illustrator, I need to say no a lot. What are good ways to say no?” So what I think this has in common is that it’s asking the wrong question. I mean, that’s mostly what brains do is ask us the wrong question.

The question isn’t what are good ways to say no because that implies that it’s something to do with what the other people are going to hear. The question is how do you want to feel about saying no. Your thoughts create your feelings, your feelings create your actions. Behavioral psychology calls this the thought-emotion-behavior cycle.

My form of coaching, we call it the thought-feeling-action cycle. It’s the same thing. Thoughts, then feelings, then behavior or actions. So saying no is a behavior or an action and the question isn’t how do I do the action well. That’s not actually - what you really want to know is how do I feel a certain way while taking this action. That’s really what you want.

Right now, I suspect you feel guilty or you feel embarrassed, you feel ashamed, or you feel something about saying no. And you’re thinking to yourself, “Well, if I just had the exact right way to say no, then I would feel better about it.” But that’s not how it works. There’s no magic combination of words that would make you feel better.

Because the real problem is you’re worrying about what the other people are going to think when you say no, or what you’re going to think about yourself, and there’s no magic combination of words that will solve that problem.

And right now, your brain wants to tell you that if you just had the right combination of words, then you would feel sure that the other people wouldn’t be upset, and then you would feel okay, and then everybody would feel great. But it has nothing to do with the words you say. You can’t work backwards like, pick a specific action so that you’ll feel a certain way. It has to go the other way.

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What do you want to feel and what do you want to believe about saying no? That's what's going to make it easy to say no. And that's when it's going to be fine if other people are upset. They're allowed to be. It doesn't matter. It's not going to keep you from saying no. It's not going to disturb you. You're going to be able to say no peacefully and with integrity when you've gotten your thoughts and feelings cleaned up about the saying no.

So it's not about what are good ways to say no. It's about what are all my thoughts and feelings about saying no and what do I want to feel and believe about saying no. That's the right question to ask yourself.

Alright, you guys, asking yourselves the right questions is so important. I feel like this is one of the big things that coaching does is really help you think through what are the correct questions to be asking yourself.

Okay, I want to do a few questions in this episode about kind of our relationships with ourselves and self-regard. All of which I kind of think are related and I know coming up in those work questions as well. Somebody asked, "I need help with low self-regard. How do you begin to not loathe yourself?"

So again, in keeping with the theme, I think that's the wrong question because here's why. When you tell your brain not to think something, that doesn't work. If I say, hey brain, don't think about the name Jeff, then my brain is like, Jeff, Jeff, the name Jeff.

Even if your brain is trying to follow your instructions, in order to know if you're thinking about the name Jeff, your brain has to scan your brain looking for the word Jeff. So it doesn't work to tell yourself not to think a certain way, and it doesn't work to tell yourself that the goal is to not loathe yourself.

We need to put it in the affirmative. Our goal isn't to stop thinking x, y, z. Our goal is to start thinking a, b, c. Those letters don't stand for anything. I

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just mean our goal is to start thinking something, not to stop thinking something.

We can't just stop thinking something. If that worked, then none of us would need coaching or therapy or anything else. So the question isn't how do I begin to not loathe myself. The question is how can I begin to love myself, but probably love is too far to start right now. I would start with how do I begin to accept or even just observe or be curious about myself.

That's a much more powerful question. You see how when you ask yourself, how can I begin to not loathe myself, your brain gives you no answers. No idea how to do that. If you ask yourself, how could I begin to be curious about myself, how could I begin to observe my own mind, how could I begin to accept who I am, now you have something to work with. Now your brain can come up with some answers.

So I would really start with - if you are in self-loathing, love may be too far, like may be too far. Even acceptance may be too far. But can you get curious? Can you start to observe your own mind? Can you be curious about what's happening in your brain? Can you practice observing without judging?

That's what you have to start with. But don't try to think about how to not loathe yourself or not hate yourself. It's very hard to figure out how to not do something. It's much easier to figure out how to do something. Frame it as the active, as the positive, or even the very neutral, but it's proactive as opposed to trying to stop doing something.

And then someone else asked, "Can you talk about self-worth? I can't reconcile how our actions don't affect our self-worth." So your actions don't affect your self-worth because your self-worth is created by your thoughts.

So let's say I pick up a pen. That's an action my hand took. I had the thought that I wanted to pick up the pen, and then I picked it up. Now, if I'm

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going to relate that back to my self-worth, I have to have a thought about how picking up the pen impacts my self-worth.

And the same is true of anything, of a pen, and of murdering someone. Your actions can't affect your self-worth because your self-worth is a thought and actions don't create thoughts. An action out in the world, a thing your body does in the world, that doesn't impact your thoughts.

You have to have a thought about it. You think about it this way. Like, I teach that if you see a rock on the ground, it doesn't have meaning until you have a human thought about the rock and what it means and why it's there. Same with somebody saying they like brunettes instead of blondes. That's not a problem for you until you have a thought about what it means about you.

When you've taken an action, that action is now a thing that happened out in the world. Just like a rock existing or someone else doing something. The action becomes a circumstance in the world. After it's done. If I punch someone in the face, now the minute after I punch them, it is now a fact that I punched them in the face. That's now a new circumstance in the world that I punched this person in the face.

That doesn't affect my self-worth unless I have a negative thought about it. If my thought is, "That was an amazing punch in the face. That guy deserved it and I'm proud of myself," then I have a positive effect on my self-worth. If my thought is, "Oh my god, I can't believe I did that. I'm so ashamed. Violence isn't the answer. I know better than that," and I tell myself I'm a bad person, now I have a negative impact on my self-worth.

It's not the action of punching the person in the face that I just took that impacts how I think about myself for my self-worth. It's my interpretation of that action that I took. It's what I make my own action mean about me as a person that impacts my self-worth.

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It's never the action, whether it's someone else's action or our action. It's always our thought about it. Our interpretation of it. That's what impacts how we think and feel about ourselves. So I think that's as good a place as any to leave it for today because that really applies to everything.

I hope that this has been helpful. I really love answering your questions and seeing how you guys think about this work. It's one of my favorite parts of The Clutch. And if you liked this episode, you should know that although I do these a couple times a year, in The Clutch, I do a bonus listener Q&A episode like this every single week just for people in The Clutch. And I'm answering only questions from people in The Clutch.

So you have a much better chance of your question getting answered because I am doing them more regularly and I'm only answering people in The Clutch's questions on those episodes. So if you want to join us, it's www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. And I will see you in there. Have a good week.

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