

## UFYB 112: Vulnerability & Intimacy



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## UFYB 112: Vulnerability & Intimacy

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 cozy inside during what was supposed to be our first snow storm, but it's more like a sleet tantrum of some kind. It's not very impressive.

It's an interesting time of year for me because I see a lot of other coaches gearing up for a last kind of month of the year push, and I have totally been there in the past. The year I launched *Unf\*ck Your Brain*, I worked so much in December. But this year we hit our revenue on our client goals in early November, and I think in the past, I would have come up with a new goal to push myself for the last part of the year, but this year I'm taking a different approach.

I think as you can probably tell by the last few episodes, I'm doing a lot of looking and working kind of inwards right now, which is funny to say that because obviously, thought work is always about looking inward, looking at our brains. But for the last few years, I think I was more doing that in a way that related to big picture external goals.

And this season, I feel like I'm really being called to more internal work. I'm going through a lot of personal development and growth and challenge right now, and it's exciting and fun and scary and uncomfortable all at once, as it should be. But it's much more about what's inside in my interpersonal relationships and less about kind of my external self and my achievements and my professional life and all of those things.

It feels right in line with kind of the hibernation of winter weather on the East coast where it feels like it's light for like, four hours a day. It's a time of slowing down and turning inwards and preparing for the next change, which

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will come with the solstice and the shortest day of the year that aren't that far away now.

Now, I don't put an enormous amount of stock in seasonal cycles as being universal patterns because obviously, people live in very different climates with very different kinds of seasons. But I have always lived in this kind of climate, the Northeast United States. I lived in the South for a little bit.

And I do notice a slowing and a self-reflection that comes in the winter. And that is kind of in keeping with what I want to talk about today. So the last topic that I did an episode on was dating and attachment anxiety, and so today I want to teach you about the flip side of that, which is intimacy and vulnerability.

And specifically, how to think about those concepts in a thought work framework. This is something I get asked about a lot and rightfully so. I think particularly because so many of my students love Brené Brown, and Brené Brown has kind of a monopoly right now on how we think about vulnerability, which is not a bad thing.

I love a lot of Brené's work, and I call her Brené like we're on a first name basis. I've given her book *The Gifts of Imperfection* to many of my clients. So this is not a podcast about how Brené Brown is wrong. But I do want to share how I think about intimacy and vulnerability in the context of thought work and the context of taking full responsibility for your own emotions.

Because I don't think it's intuitively obvious how to reconcile those two things. So let's start with vulnerability, which I think is the bigger piece of it. The way that we tend to think and talk about vulnerability is the capacity to be hurt by someone else. We are vulnerable. That's what we say and we use that to mean we can be injured emotionally or physically.

We'll say that an injured or an old animal is vulnerable to predators. And we say that we're vulnerable to someone else when we have kind of exposed

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our emotional belly to them. We've shown them our soft spots. We are risking the possibility that they will bite that soft spot, that soft part of us, and not in a way that we will like.

We talk about vulnerability like it means risking hurt or pain and we mean hurt or pain caused by someone else. That's what we think vulnerability means. Making it possible for someone else to emotionally hurt us. Giving them that power.

But if it's our thoughts that cause our feelings, then no one else can emotionally hurt us, right? Other people's words and actions are neutral circumstances. Our brain has to interpret them to decide what we think and feel about them. So it's interesting to consider what we mean when we say that we feel vulnerable to someone.

I think when we say we feel vulnerable, we do mean that we are scared of experiencing pain or rejection. But we are misidentifying the source of that pain and rejection, which is really our own thoughts. If you think about it, there are things you could share with someone else where you would not feel vulnerable at all. Even if they reject you, right?

If you share something you're proud of and feel great about yourself for with someone, you don't feel vulnerable. Let's say you feel fine about your height. When you tell someone how tall you are, do you feel vulnerable? No. If you feel fine about it, you don't.

If you feel great about being 5'3 and someone freaks out and rejects you because they find out you're 5'3, but you don't feel any shame about that, you just think, oh wow, bullet dodged. Good thing they found out how tall I was early on. Whereas of course, if you have negative thoughts about your height, then it feels scary to admit it to someone before meeting.

Or let's say you're proud of where you went to college. You don't feel vulnerable when you tell people. And if someone were to react with

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rejection or hostility, you would not feel bad. You would just think they were weird.

Or an example I often use is like, I don't feel vulnerable when I tell someone I'm a feminist because if they don't like that, if they reject me for it, I'm not going to be hurt because I think it's great. So when we feel vulnerable, I think what it means is that we are disclosing or sharing something with someone else about which we still feel anxiety or shame or distress or fear.

We don't feel vulnerable when we are disclosing things that we feel good about or neutral about. So our discomfort with vulnerability, the reason vulnerability is scary is really just a fear that someone is going to react in a way that confirms what we already think about ourselves.

That's how thoughts always work. We don't care about other people's negative opinions unless we fear they are true or we agree with them. So when we feel vulnerable sharing something with someone, I think it's because we are actually judging or shaming ourselves for the thing we are sharing. And then we're afraid the other person will as well.

We're afraid they will confirm our worst fears about ourselves. That's why it's scary. When we worry that sharing with someone will drive them away, it's because we're already driving ourselves away. We fear their rejection because we're really fearing our own rejection of ourselves.

And this is the danger of outsourcing your opinion about yourself to someone else. If they react in a way that is kinder to you than you are to yourself, then sometimes you're able to adopt that perspective. You basically just borrow their thoughts and you think those and you feel good.

But if they react in a way that is similar to how you already think about yourself, it feels 10 times worse because you take it as additional evidence to bolster your own negative thoughts, and it kind of overrides the

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tentatively positive thoughts or accepting thoughts about yourself you are trying to believe.

So the truth is the only person that we are emotionally vulnerable to as adults is ourselves. The only person you're truly emotionally vulnerable to is you. And you probably do not take nearly as much care with your own thoughts about yourself and your own vulnerability with yourself as you want other people to.

I think that real vulnerability is sharing what's going on in our thoughts and feelings with someone else, sharing our internal life, even though they don't cause our feelings, they can't make them better and they can't make them worse. It's actually about showing up to share with someone despite our own discomfort about doing so.

We don't become vulnerable by giving other people the power to hurt us. We can become vulnerable in our intimate relationships by being willing to be vulnerable to ourselves. When we share our inner most experience with someone else, we are not giving them an opportunity to hurt us. We're giving ourselves an opportunity to hurt us.

None of us are perfect at managing our minds, and in those heightened emotional states, we're particularly apt to momentarily lose our shit. Stop managing our minds. So in essence, I think it's like we're turning on the lights in a room that we usually ignore, and we're inviting someone else in.

And our real fear is not what they will think of the room, but what we will say to ourselves if we think that they don't like it. And that's why often vulnerability is so uncomfortable. Even when someone reassures you that they're not rejecting you, or they handle it the way you thought you wanted them to.

It's the same way that an apology often doesn't change your anger. Expressions of acceptance and love often don't change your experience of

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vulnerability as uncomfortable. Because unless you start thinking new thoughts, you're still going to have those feelings, regardless of what the other person does.

So I think being willing to be uncomfortable and be afraid of that experience and show up to have it anyway, that's what true vulnerability is. Those of us who want to control other people's perceptions of us in order to feel safe, we don't like to show all the parts of ourselves. Especially the parts we have shame or fear about.

Vulnerability is being willing to show up and let ourselves be seen by another person whose thoughts and feelings we can't control. Being willing to risk the discomfort that may arise when we have our own thoughts and feelings about that experience or that process.

So when we choose to share those parts, we choose to go through that discomfort. True vulnerability is not giving someone else power to hurt us, but by willing to show up and be uncomfortable being seen in our real messiness as a human, with an imperfectly managed mind, who doesn't always think or feel or act the way they want to.

So in that sense, vulnerability and authenticity are very closely connected. We can be vulnerable when we are willing to show up in the truth of ourselves, which isn't always our favorite parts of ourselves. It isn't always clean and neat and pretty. It's not always what we imagine other people want to see. It's not always the image that we want to cultivate and present in order to try to control their thoughts and feelings about us.

Vulnerability is admitting our own imperfections. Of course, our imperfections, it's not a real thing. Those are just thoughts we have about ourselves. But while we believe them, they are real to us. And vulnerability is being willing to show up anyway.

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It's almost like what we're doing when we choose to be vulnerable with someone is we're choosing to subject ourselves to our own minds. We're choosing to subject ourselves to the pain that we will create for ourselves in order to share with them.

We are willing to admit that we don't have it all together, to admit we have negative emotions, to admit we have parts of ourselves we fear or are ashamed of. We're willing to show up as who we really are, even though it means we can't control their thoughts and feelings.

The truth is we can never control their thoughts or feelings, but we pretend we can by curating and showing them only a certain version of ourselves. We pretend that that helps us control what they think and feel about us.

And to be vulnerable means to show up as you truly are and acknowledge what was always true, which is that you don't control how other people are going to receive that. And to be vulnerable with yourself to allow yourself to share your imperfections with someone else, without making that an opportunity to just beat yourself up.

When we are willing to do that, what we are really willing to do is to share our thoughts with this other person. Even the thoughts we don't like. Even the thoughts we're resisting, even the thoughts we want to change. So the reason I think that vulnerability creates intimacy is that intimacy is our name for the love or affection that we feel about someone when we believe we know them or we believe they know us.

It's about sort of emotional proximity or kind of knowledge and exposure. It's not a word that we use to describe a rockstar whose music is meaningful to us. We don't have an intimate relationship with them. Or like, a writer we admire but have never met.

Now, we might be intimate with their work because we're so exposed to it and have developed this conversation with it. We're not intimate with them.



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We're intimate with people or sometimes things who know us in real life or who we know, who we have spent time with, who we have shared certain facts or feelings or thoughts about our lives with.

So the standard theory would be that intimacy is not possible without vulnerability, because in order to feel known, you have to give someone the power to hurt your feelings. That intimacy and vulnerability go together because what makes us feel close to people is letting them in in such a way that we are subject to them creating feelings for us, creating our feelings.

But I think intimacy is not possible without vulnerability because intimacy comes from the process of sharing our thoughts or feelings or stories with someone. And sharing our true thoughts and feelings and stories, messy and imperfect as they are requires vulnerability. We don't share our thoughts and feelings with someone else so that they can fix them or hurt them.

They can't do either one of those things. We share our thoughts and feelings with someone so that we can experience the willingness to show up as ourselves. The relationship with someone else is the way in which we learn to deepen and mature our relationship with ourselves.

One of the things I see sometimes in my students and in my own brain is that we want to learn how to manage our own minds and take responsibility for our feelings so that we get "better outcomes" in our relationships. Because we secretly think that eventually, once we've figured out how to have friendships or romantic relationships or handle our family the right way, then we can finally depend on them to take over being in charge of our feelings.

Like, we want to get better at having friend or at dating so that we can get friends or a partner so that we can then eventually feel safe and happy forever because we'll have attracted better people who will then cause all

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of our feelings for us positively. But it can't be instrumental. That's not how it works.

Nothing is forever and people and lives are always changing. People make fast friends and then they fall out or they move away. People fall in love and fall out of love, or people fall in love and don't fall out of love, but one of them gets hit by a bus. Eventually, every relationship of every kind has to end. Either one of you ends it or one of you dies. Those are the only two endings. Only two options.

So the point of vulnerability and intimacy aren't to get better at making connections so that you can finally get some kind of permanent feeling of safety and love from someone else. The point of it is to learn how to be present in your relationship with yourself at a deeper level.

How to share what you think is shameful about you and love yourself through that. If you're lucky, the person you're sharing it with is able to model that for you, to give you an example of what it means to make and hold space for the parts of you that you aren't proud of or that you want to reject.

This is why some relationships can be so helpful in that way, and it's actually why coaching is so helpful I think because that's what a coach does. A coach holds and shares space with you to give you an example of what it means to fully accept yourself. By fully accepting you and not judging you and modeling how to bring curiosity and awareness instead of judgment and criticism, that's what a good coach does.

But also sometimes, we're lucky enough to have it happen in our personal relationships. But even if it doesn't happen, even if in your personal relationships, even if you aren't lucky enough to have somebody else show up in that way, you can do it for yourself and you have to. Because the truth is even if someone else does show up for you in that way, if you're not ready to show up for yourself that way, it doesn't matter.

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You will drive them away or you will not see it. It won't make a difference. You have to be able to learn how to show up for yourself in that way because your relationship with yourself is the longest and most important one you'll ever have.

So how can you be more vulnerable with yourself? And how can you see and accept other people's vulnerability with themselves? How can you make space for that, even when they think it has something to do with you? Those are some powerful questions to think about, my chickens.

So if you're in The Clutch, I want you to post your answers in the Facebook group so that you can work on really teasing out where are the places in your life that you need to encourage more vulnerability with yourself in the way that creates true intimacy.

Because one of the things I think that happens is when we are afraid to be truly vulnerable, we seek false intimacy. We want too much too quickly; we want expressions of affection and adoration that haven't really been earned. We want to fast forward intimacy because we're not willing to be vulnerable and uncomfortable.

And I think a lot of us do that in our personal and our romantic relationships. So thinking about where in your life you need to work on being vulnerable with yourself and how that would impact how you show up in your relationships. That is such important work. So if you're in The Clutch, I want you to think about that and post it in the Facebook group so that we can all discuss it.

If you're not in The Clutch and this is something you struggle with, then this is a great time to join because I actually think now that I've written this episode, that this is something The Clutch does as a group. Not just me as a coach and the other coaches in there, but all of the members showing up for each other in a way that allows for vulnerability and intimacy, in a way

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that holds space and showing each other what it's like to accept with curiosity and love instead of judgment and criticism. It's so powerful.

There's no better way to start 2020 that I can think of.  
[www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). I'll see you there.

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