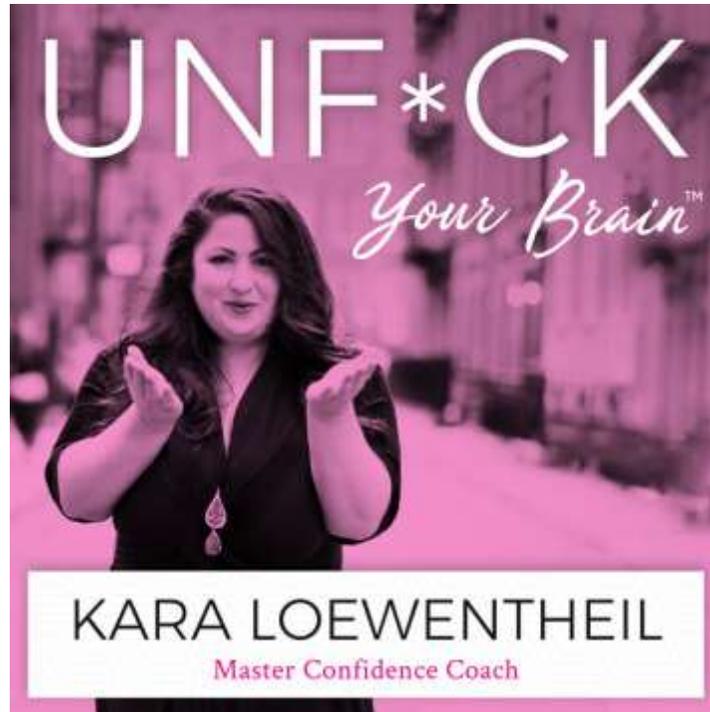


UFYB 118: Empathy & Other People's Models



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 all of my fine feathered friends, or non-feathered friends? If you are a chicken who doesn't have feathers, you are part of the flock as well. I'm a little bit giddy. Little bit loopy today. I've been working on the planning for Clutch College, which I know I've talked about a few times.

And one of the things we're going to dive into really deeply is family relationships. Whether it's your family of origin or your chosen family, your family by marriage or your bio family, your adopted family, whatever family relationships you struggle with. And so because of that, I've been thinking a lot about what is it that gets in the way of our having the kind of loving, connected, fun, joyful, peaceful, supportive relationships that we want to have with other people, whether they're family or anything else.

And so today I want to teach you how to think about other people's models, and I'm going to explain what that means. If you don't know what a model is, don't worry. But I kind of want to set the stage because I think that one of the main causes of suffering that we experience in our human lives is the meaning that we make and kind of project onto other people's words or actions.

Or sometimes just what we imagine other people are thinking when they haven't said or done anything. Sometimes they haven't taken any action or said anything. We're actually just torturing ourselves with our imaginary idea of what their thoughts are. It's like the electrical signals in our brains are hallucinating what the electrical signals in their brains might be

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hallucinating, without us even knowing what's actually going on in there. It's really mind-blowing if you really sit with it.

So I've been thinking about this a lot because I've been working on this Clutch College curriculum, and also because I'm in a new-ish relationship, and if you're really trying to communicate and understand each other in a new relationship, holy fuck, are the first few months so challenging. People always talk about the honeymoon period, and I think people sort of - there's a stereotype that in the beginning it's so easy and then things get harder, it gets harder to communicate.

I do not think that's true. I think that's what happens when people aren't communicating in the first part. People just assume that the other partner shares their thoughts, especially if they're not aware that their thoughts are optional and they just think their thoughts are obvious. And people tend to skip over points of friction or disagreement. Nobody wants to be in conflict early on in a relationship.

And then so we just sort of - most people just ignore all those things in the beginning or assume they're thinking the same things, and then eventually they start to have conflict and realize that they can't communicate and that they don't have that vocabulary with each other.

But if you start a relationship, whether it's romantic or anything else, a friendship or a relationship with someone who comes into your life through a different relationship, like a mother-in-law or something, if you start a relationship out trying to communicate clearly and honestly and not skip over those little moments that betray friction, it is a ton of work.

You're dealing with an entirely different brain than yours, and that brain has totally different thoughts, which is so rude, right? How dare they? And for me, especially as a coach, a lot of my professional daily interactions are with people who are kind of asking me to tell them what to think. People

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who are deferring to me and as I would want in my partner, that's not what happens.

So I actually think it's so kind of refreshing and humbling and necessary for me to interact with someone who - obviously I have lots of friends who aren't in that kind of relationship to me, but my friends, we already know each other pretty well. But for me to have ongoing intimate interactions with someone who is new to me, who's not in that kind of relationship to me, has all of his own thoughts that he thinks are true, and has no deference to me or my interpretations or ideas, that's so, I think, important for all of us to experience, and those of us who are coaches to experience and kind of keep us grounded, and it's challenging.

And so one of the things that I've been thinking about as I'm learning to communicate with this entirely new person who thinks very differently from me is that so much of our suffering in our relationships comes from not understanding the other person's model. So let me explain what I'm talking about when I say the model, if you don't know what that means.

If you're in The Clutch, you already know what this is, but if you're not, it's kind of a fundamental self-coaching tool that I teach in The Clutch. I learned it from my teacher, Brooke Castillo. It's basically a way of describing the universal process by which we encounter things outside of us, we have thoughts about them. Those thoughts produce feelings and actions and results.

I think that the model is like, a kind of brilliant synthesis of what we learn from meditation and mindfulness and cognitive behavioral therapy and psychology, and even some kind of more woo manifestation kind of world. It's all pulled together and made really concrete and evidence-based.

So here's the basics. You encounter an external circumstance, your brain observes something outside of you, like another person saying some

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words, and then you have a thought about it, and that thought produces a feeling in your body. And then you take an action based on that feeling.

So maybe you say something back to the person or you ignore the person or you start crying or you go home and eat a pizza and drink some wine to numb out, or whatever you do because of how you feel, which is created by the thought your brain had about what the person said.

And then that action you take, whatever it is, that creates a result for you in your own life. It is a super powerful tool and it's okay if it seems a little overwhelming if you haven't heard it before. I can't go all the way into it in-depth in a podcast. We spend five weeks teaching it to you properly when you join The Clutch. We really get into the model deep there.

But that's the basic idea. The circumstance exists, you have a thought about it, the thought causes a feeling, the feeling motivates an action, and the action produces a result. And for the purposes of this podcast, you really only need to worry about that kind of thought line. It's really about the other person's thoughts.

But if you do know the whole model, if you are in The Clutch and you have studied the model or you've studied it with me before, you can really think about this podcast in the context of the whole model. If you haven't, you just think about this podcast in the context of other people's thoughts basically. You'll still get a ton out of it.

So the crazy thing about the human mind is that we're always having our own thoughts about things and because they're our thoughts, we think they completely make sense and that there can't even be any other way. And even if we see that maybe our thoughts are irrational in some way, I think we just fundamentally have trouble imagining that someone else doesn't share that.

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It's like if you're really cold in a room, it's hard for you to really understand that someone else might be hot. You might intellectually understand that if they say the words I'm hot, what that means, but you just don't really get how that's possible when you're really cold.

And the same is true with our thoughts. Even ironically when we think our own thoughts might be irrational, or even when we want to believe it's possible to believe something else, we're still kind of working with that initial thought as our default thought about the circumstance, whatever we are observing.

And so even if someone else shares their different thought, I think often we don't really understand it. That's why, for instance, if you have the default thought, let's say, that you're ugly, even if you wish you could think something different, if someone says to you, "I think you're beautiful," you don't really believe them, right? Or at best you think they're mistaken.

Like at worse, you think they're outright lying to you to make you feel better, and at best, you think they're confused or kind of biased somehow. Because your default thought is still that you're ugly, and so you really have a hard time conceptualizing that someone else might have a different thought.

Or think about when you're trying to come up with a new thought to think about something. If you coach yourself or you're in The Clutch and you're doing thought ladders, often it's really challenging before you've learned the skill of doing it because your brain is so stuck in its current thought that it can't imagine what else a person could think.

And the same thing happens when we are imagining what other people think when we're interacting with them. We assume they must share our thoughts and even if we know conceptually or intellectually that might not

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be true, like most of us would agree with the statement, "Other people might have different thoughts from me."

We agree that must be theoretically true, it's hard for us to really emotionally understand that they may have totally different thoughts than we do because we're so bought into our own thoughts and we don't spend enough time imagining what someone else's thoughts or model might be.

So let me give you an example. I was recently coaching a client of mine about her thoughts that her girlfriend wasn't prioritizing her. So she had the thought that her girlfriend was prioritizing her work, the girlfriend's work, over time with her, my client. The her-her makes it a little confusing in telling the story, so it's her, the girlfriend, her, the client.

So what my client imagined was that her girlfriend's model had the thought, "Work is more important than my girlfriend," or, "My girlfriend's not a priority." That's what she imagined her girlfriend was thinking. Now, that's not because she sat down and said to herself, "I wonder what my girlfriend's thinking." That's just because those were her thoughts and she had not spent the time to imagine her girlfriend's model, imagine her girlfriend's thoughts. She just was projecting her own thoughts.

They seemed true to her, so she was like, that must be what my girlfriend's thinking too. My girlfriend must be thinking, "Work is more important than this relationship, or this relationship is not a priority." So when I asked her why she was choosing to assume that, she said, "Well, you know, planning and respecting your calendar is how you show your priorities, and she isn't planning and respecting time with me, and we all know that that's how you show your priorities."

It was so fascinating. That was my client's thought because she's in The Clutch, where I teach you how to plan your time and how to use your calendar, so it makes total sense to a Clutch-trained brain that the way you

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show you prioritize and respect something is putting it on your calendar and sticking to it.

And in her mind, if somebody wasn't doing it, that meant it wasn't a priority. But when we started talking about it, I said, "Is your girlfriend in The Clutch?" She said no. I said, "Does your girlfriend even use a calendar?" And she was like, "No, not really."

So you started to see how her assumptions, not just about the surface level of the girlfriend's thought, but all the assumptions underneath that were playing into her model and how she was thinking about it, she was just assuming that her girlfriend had all those same assumptions and thoughts and understood the world in the same way, that her girlfriend was living in the same mental world that she was.

But of course, that wasn't the case. So then I asked her to make a list of ways that her girlfriend was showing that she cared about time with her, my client, and the relationship, and what she came up with was like, "Okay, well yes, sometimes she wants to change plans because of work but we get together regularly, she communicates with me. When I express my feelings, she is receptive and she cares about them."

She came up with a whole list of ways that her girlfriend was demonstrating that she cared about her and was prioritizing the relationship. And then when we really dug into it, she admitted that her girlfriend had actually told her that she felt she was prioritizing the relationship because she was doing those things. So they were just living in two totally different models.

The girlfriend's model was, "I'm prioritizing this relationship. I'm making time to see my partner and to communicate with her and yes, of course, I have to prioritize work because I have to make money," or for whatever her reasons were, but I'm making sure that this is a priority. So that's her girlfriend's model that she's living in.

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And my client's model is, "She's not prioritizing this because she's not doing it the way I would do it. And if anybody did prioritize me or our relationship, they would do it in this way, using this tool that I use." My client was totally living in her model with her assumptions that her girlfriend just didn't even share.

So by looking for contrary evidence and breaking down the thought she had, breaking down her assumptions, she was able to see that her girlfriend's model actually was the opposite of what she had assumed. Her girlfriend did have the thought, "I'm prioritizing this relationship." And to her girlfriend, that was 100% true.

Her girlfriend believed that thought and her actions reflected that for her, within the context and the constraints of all the thoughts that her girlfriend had and believed. In her girlfriend's model, in the universe of her models, she was prioritizing the relationship. And in my client's universe, she couldn't see that because she could only imagine someone having her own thoughts about what that would look like.

And now my client might have expressed her priority differently if it was her model, but by looking at her girlfriend's model, free of her own assumptions, she could see that her girlfriend was actually doing exactly what she wanted her to do. She had the exact thought that my client wanted her girlfriend to have. She just had to let go of her own thoughts and assumptions in order to see her girlfriend's model clearly.

Now, obviously that's not always going to be the case. The person isn't always going to be doing what we want or actually having the thought we want them to have, but even when they aren't, by seeing the other person's model, we can get so much more clarity on why other people behave the way they do, and we can get outside of our own assumptions.

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So to take another example, I had a client who, one of their parents was always sending them unsolicited career advice, and my client was like, "This is nonsense, it's so stupid, it's not helpful. They don't know anything about my career." And my client found this very upsetting because my client was making it mean that their parent didn't think they knew what they were doing and didn't believe in them and didn't think that they were an adult, that they were treating them like a child, and she had all these thoughts about what it meant that her parent would send her this unsolicited advice.

But when we worked through this and we tried to imagine what their model might be, she was able to see that that wasn't the only option. Yes, it is possible that they were thinking, "My daughter has no idea what she's doing, she's an idiot." We can't 100% guarantee that's not what was happening.

But it's equally possible, and I would say much more plausible that they weren't thinking that at all, that they were thinking something like, "Well, it's my job to guide and support my daughter," or, "I want to help my daughter have an amazing career," or, "This will be helpful to them," or, "It's a parent's job to give advice." Who knows? But it's totally possible and I think more plausible that they were thinking that rather than they were thinking, "My daughter is an idiot who has no idea what she's doing."

Most of us are mostly thinking about ourselves. It's usually not really about other people. And once we sort of brainstormed what might their parent's model be, my client was able to see that, oh right, those thoughts would lead to certain feelings and certain actions in their parent's model. It gave her so much more understanding and compassion for them. And it was so much less upsetting to her.

Then instead of being resentful and angry and defensive about it, she actually could just see it as an expression of love and care, because she

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could imagine that the model was not I want to piss off my daughter and make her feel stupid, that that wasn't the thought, that the thought was I want to help, or I think this is a good idea, or my daughter is so grown up and independent and I want to try to still be important to her, show that I know something.

Who knows what the thought was, but any of those thoughts, imagining those thoughts feel so much better. Now, do we know 100% if we were right? No, of course not. We can't prove it, but who cares? The question isn't is that thought 100% true and can I prove it? It's is that thought helpful?

And seeing that there are a lot of positive, well-intentioned things someone could be thinking that caused their action is way more helpful usually. It allows us to feel at least neutral and sometimes positive emotion instead of a lot of negative emotion.

Ironically, I think that when we start to learn thought work and see that thoughts are optional, sometimes there's a period where this phenomenon actually gets worse because we no longer buy into our own thoughts as much. We see our thoughts are optional. So then we start to see that other people's thoughts are optional, and then we forget that other people don't know that and that they really deeply believe their own thoughts.

So we just think, "Well alright, they might think that they need to prioritize work, but that thought is optional, so they should just change it or get over it." That was going on with the client I talked about earlier who had the thought that her girlfriend wasn't prioritizing her. She knew her girlfriend had said explicitly like, "Well, I need to move our plans around sometimes for work because I need to make more money."

But my client who knows the model, we do this sometimes. We're like, well, my thoughts are true but that other person's thoughts are optional. So her

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thought was, "Yeah, my girlfriend's thought is dumb and not true. It's just money scarcity. She doesn't need to prioritize work. She doesn't need to move things around. If she used our calendar, then she could prioritize her relationship."

Again, she's thinking about her own thoughts, her own model, not her girlfriend's model. Her girlfriend 100% genuinely believed she had to prioritize work to make more money, and that she was prioritizing her relationship as much as she could within that restraint that she believed in and was real to her.

But my client had to let go of her attachment to her model as being true and correct in order to be able to mentally inhabit her girlfriend's model and see how if you believed her girlfriend's thoughts, her feelings, actions, and results all made sense. It meant nothing about their relationship or their girlfriend's feelings for her.

So you have to be careful, especially if you are in The Clutch and you're doing more of this work and you're starting to see your thoughts are optional, it's so tempting to kind of believe your own thoughts and think, "Well, this other person's thoughts are optional and they should change them." That's not what we're doing here. Other people believe their thoughts and they're allowed to. We do not need to make them stop believing their thoughts. We just have to manage our own mind.

I get a lot of questions about empathy because I think we're taught that it means sharing other people's feelings, or feeling their feelings with them or for them, which I don't believe in. I believe our feelings are caused by our own thoughts. But I think the way that I prefer to think about empathy is that it's more like kind of compassionate, non-ego driven understanding.

Empathy is when we can truly see someone else's thoughts, feelings, and actions playing out. We can see the model that they're living in, and we can

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feel human to human compassion for them without our own ego or interpretation or evaluation or kind of appropriation of their thoughts or experience getting in the way.

So playing around with what other people's models might be is one of the best ways I know to get out of your own ego and your own limited perspective and see what kind of emotional experience someone else may be having based on their thoughts. And it works for the people in your life that you want to think well of, but it also works for people in your life that you have negative thoughts about that you aren't as motivated to think well of.

Imagine the coworker that you hate. Your thought about them might be that they think they're smarter than everyone else and that's why they interrupt at meetings. So you think the thought in their model is I'm smarter than everyone else, and then their feeling is whatever it is, confident, entitled, and their action is interrupt people.

Now, maybe that's their thought. I don't know. We can't be sure. But let's imagine what other models they might be living in. We know the action is interrupting someone else while talking. What kind of feeling causes that? Maybe it's feeling confident and supercilious and arrogant. Maybe it's feeling anxious. Maybe it's feeling excited. Who knows?

What kind of thought could cause those feelings? Maybe they just think that they have a really great idea. Maybe they're worried that other people will think they're dumb and so they need to show off. We don't know. Often when you play with the other person's model, you'll find that it's just as plausible that someone is thinking the opposite of what you assume.

For instance, you might think someone doesn't talk to you at lunch because they don't like you. Now, maybe that's true, or maybe it's because they're afraid that you don't like them. Maybe they're afraid to talk to you. We may

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never know for sure, but seeing that either one could be their model starts to shift your belief that you already know what everyone else is thinking and that it usually revolves around negative opinions about you, which is what we assume.

So the next time that you feel “triggered” by someone else or you don't like how they're acting, I want you to think about what are you assuming are their thoughts, what are you assuming are all the assumptions of their model, of their universe, and try brainstorming what other models they might be living in.

Don't assume that your thought is the only thought they could be having. The better you get at this skill, the less personally you will take other people's actions and the more freedom you will experience in your own mind and your own life. Alright, give it a try this week, chickens. If you're in The Clutch, report back. Let us know how it goes. I'll talk to you next week.

If this episode was speaking your language, sounded like it was in your brain, I want you to come check out The Clutch because it will help you unfuck any relationship in your life. If you want to learn how to show up confidently in work relationships, family relationships, friendships, and romantic relationships, or in your parenting, The Clutch will be your lifeline.

It comes tailor-made with a community of badass women doing this life-changing work alongside you, along with monthly coaching calls and daily expert coaching on any relationship you're working on, including your relationship with yourself. Check it out at unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch, or you can just text your email to 347-934-8861. If you text your email address to that number, we will text you right back with a link to check out everything you need to know to join. I can't wait to see you there.