

UFYB 121: Five Years of Thought Work Part 3: Friendships and My Self-Relationship



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. So I am just back from a week out of town. I went to Nashville and then I went to New Orleans. And some of you may know, I lived in New Orleans for two years, back when I was clerking, so it's always kind of wild to go there and remember that time in my life when things were so different for me.

It's really kind of in keeping with the theme of this series. The other thing I love about New Orleans is that it is such a kind of hedonistic, playful place. I, of course, think there's a time for buckling down and getting shit done and delayed gratification, all of that good work ethic stuff that I teach you guys.

But there's also a place for play and mystery and magic and farce. Life is not just about being as productive as possible and I think sometimes we get a little fixated on that in the self-development world. I mean, of course I teach that we want to be conscious in how we consume things and be aware of when we're using substances or activities to buffer our emotions, but I also think that there's kind of a human impulse towards breaking free and a little bit of chaos and hedonism.

And that's something to be mindful of and maybe constrain and consider but I don't think it's something to be completely denied or stamped out. I think sometimes those desires are our way of surrendering to and making peace with the ultimate truth that most of what happens outside of us in our life is not in our control. I don't think our work is to try to control the world.

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Our work is to learn how to discern what we can and can't control, and most of us have it backwards. We're constantly trying to control things that we can't control, like the exact size and shape of our bodies forever, and aging, and other people's behavior, and random chance that seems unfair.

And then we're constantly ignoring the things we can control, like what happens in our own brains and what we can create in our own emotional lives and our external lives, and the parts of our physical experience in our bodies we can impact. We just tend to try to control things we can't control, and then underestimate how much we can control.

So anyway, I always like going to New Orleans to be reminded of that part of life that's not fully sanitized and controlled. Sometimes you go to a parade and you end up with glitter in your mouth, which is what happened to me. I don't know how. You just have to go along for the ride.

So that's my meditation on the complexities of life today, but it does lead me to the topic for this third in the series of how thought work has changed my life in the last five years. And this is a question that comes up a lot, especially with my Clutch students.

They're learning how to actually coach themselves and change their neural pathways, but of course in the beginning, you can only see the next few steps in front of you. So they often want to know what they can expect from six months, a year, a few years down the line, and I thought a lot of you would have that same question.

So if you just sort of picked this episode randomly, it's part of a three-part series where I'm addressing what you can change in your life if you do the work. And specifically, what I've been able to create and change in my life. So if you skipped volume one and two, I do recommend you go back and listen. It's just the last two episodes.

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In volume one, I talked about how thought work has changed my relationship with my body and food and movement and work and money. Covered a lot. Volume two, I talked about family and my love life and romantic relationships. And I got a lot of feedback from y'all that this was really helpful and you really loved hearing the inside scoop and found it inspirational.

So if that is how you feel and you're not in The Clutch already, then I want you to come join us so that I can help teach you how to do this for yourself. The podcast is like listening to a book on tape about how to build a house, but The Clutch is like joining a building collective with blueprints and lessons on how to use a hammer and contractors you can have on call any time. Way better chance you're actually going to build the house that way.

So today I'm going to talk about my social relationships and my relationship with myself and my thought work. So I think that my close friendships have maybe changed the least in terms of areas of my work personally, but that has nothing to do with kind of thought work. It's just that friendships are basically the one area of my life that I felt pretty solid about before I discovered thought work.

In terms of kind of my close friendships, I've always had very good friends and long close friendships over many decades. And of course, the reason for that is just my thoughts. For whatever reason, I have always had thoughts that I'm a good friend and having good friends is fun and easy, and my friends are just there for me to love and enjoy them.

A lot of you don't have those thoughts about friends and that's fine. Lots of people in my life I did not have those thoughts about, but I think all of us have like, some areas that haven't been as challenging for us as others, and this just happened to be mine. And those are pretty much my thoughts about friendship before I even discovered thought work.

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So that being said, there were still some fault lines kind of in my thinking around friendship that showed up when I started doing thought work, and I had a lot of mental drama around social occasions and interactions with kind of, acquaintances or not close friends or strangers. And that aspect has really changed for me with thought work.

Before thought work, if I identified someone I wanted to be friends with and they didn't seem to want to be friends with me, or wanted to be as close as I wanted to be, I took that very personally. I would get my worth all wrapped up in it, kind of like in dating. I would become kind of weird about it, not like - I didn't stand under anyone's window with a boombox or anything, but I definitely pursued friendships with people who were clearly just not that interested in being friends with me in hindsight.

And I don't blame them because of course, when I was in that place, it had nothing to do with them. It wasn't like I just genuinely appreciated how great they were. It might have started that way, but since they weren't as into me, our connection didn't really exist. I was really using them to work out my self-esteem issues, or more accurately, to not work them out.

I also just had a lot of social anxiety about any occasion where I wasn't going to be able to just hang out with a good friend in the corner. You know, like that kind of party was fine, but parties that wouldn't be like that were kind of excruciating, and networking or networking events made me want to die.

Going to conferences I found very stressful if I was ever going to have to interact with anyone. I did not like talking to strangers, and I felt like any big social gathering was just an opportunity for me to kind of not be cool or not fit in or not be chosen.

So I avoided them as much as I could. And I can say the first element, kind of getting hung up on friendships where the other person wasn't that into

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the friendship, that's pretty much disappeared. I've let go of those kinds of relationships or trying to make them happen.

And I want to be really clear. This is not the same as having a complex manual for how a friend should act and then being upset if people don't entirely follow it. I'm talking about relationships where like, not only was I doing most of the initiating, which I've talked about as fine, if that's how your friendship works, but I wasn't really getting much response when I did.

I'm talking about situations where clearly, the other person just wasn't that interested in spending time with me. This is not the same as like, oh well, my best friend only did 19 of the 20 things I wanted for my bridal shower so she's a bitch. That's not what we're talking about.

Most of this kind of friendship that I'm describing, where I was sort of wanting to be friends with someone who didn't really want to be friends with me is about your own ego. It's about my ego certainly. And in the few rare cases where you genuinely really like and enjoy someone who just isn't that into you because of their thoughts, you can still love them and think they're awesome from afar.

I actually have one friend like that where really, we're mostly only friends in my mind now and that's okay. I think she's amazing, I cheer on her success. We don't really hang out anymore when I stopped really pushing the friendship. It kind of unfolded, and that's totally fine. I still love her. I think she's great and I don't take it personally that she doesn't have those same thoughts about me.

I mean, she may think I'm great, but for whatever reason, our friendship wasn't something she wanted to prioritize, and that's all good. In terms of the second element, kind of parties and networking, I would say this is an improved area, but it's one I still work on.

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I have decades of default thought patterns about avoiding those kinds of events, and I kind of frequently have to remind myself that these are old thoughts, I don't actually hate talking to people, what my brain tells me. Social anxiety is really our thoughts about ourselves. I talk about this at length in another podcast. We worry about what other people think of us because we worry that they're judging us the same way we judge ourselves.

So the less you criticize and judge yourself, the less you worry about other people doing that. And then just the more fun it is to meet other people. So as I've reduced my self-judgment, my social anxiety, I found that I actually want more social interaction than I used to think I did.

I don't feel as introverted. So I've been working on increasing my in-person social network here in New York and making time to travel to see friends who live in other places. I have a lot of close friendships with people that live all over the world.

I still sometimes see my brain have negative thoughts about going into group situations where I don't know anyone, but I'm working on those thoughts and I take advantage of the opportunity to do it and show myself that it's fine and I won't die.

And I think of it a lot like going to the gym or something, where I often don't want to do it in the sense of having an immediate desire to at the time, and that's okay. If you think about it from the primitive brain perspective, the primitive brain fears social rejection and thinks it will die if it's rejected.

So you're basically saying to your brain, hey, let's go meet a whole new tribe of strangers and try to convince them in 15 minutes to share their food with us and help us fight off our enemies, and if they don't want to, then we might die. Your primitive brain is never going to be excited about that idea. It's like a very high-risk, low-reward situation, so that's fine. I know that it

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won't be and I don't let that determine my decision. And once I go and connect with people, I almost always enjoy it.

The other secret is that when you feel awkward in social situations, it's always because you're focused on yourself and your experience. If you just focus on other people and asking them questions, you'll usually stop thinking about yourself and be genuinely interested in them and other people love talking about themselves.

This is the easiest way to bond. Again, I talk about this in the social anxiety episode. So that's friendship. And then kind of the last area I want to talk about is my friendship with the best friend I'll ever have, which is myself. And I can say that overall, I am my own best friend.

I think I'm sometimes - I'm no longer really mean to myself but I don't always go out of my way to be as nice to myself as a good friend would be, and I still sometimes believe my own bullshit more than a good friend would believe it, which is why I have a coach and everyone needs a coach.

But being my own best friend is always my goal because I'm the person I'm going to be spending the rest of my life with. And most of us are not even close to our own best friend. We're like, a frenemy at best and some of us, it's like a mortal enemy at worst situation. I often think of that old saying, love is patient, love is kind.

Patience and kindness are what I'm always trying to cultivate in my relationship with myself. When I started learning how to coach myself, I had this experience that a lot of my students have, where I wanted to use thought work to fix myself so that I could finally be nice to myself and feel good enough.

That's totally backwards. You can't fix yourself into loving yourself. You can't take actions in order to change your thoughts about yourself. That's

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trying to go backwards. It has to go the other way around. You have to change your thoughts about yourself in order to change your actions.

When I started thought work, I had very little emotional resilience, and I think that I loved this form of thought work I teach because it's so analytical and it was such an easy way to identify and literally change my thoughts. And I really took to that like a duck to water and I just wanted to change all my thoughts.

But what that meant was I was in a rush still to get away from my feelings. I didn't want to have negative emotions. I just wanted to change all my thoughts to get away from them. And then eventually I realized that I needed to practice the ability to tolerate distress and negative emotion because trying to get away from them was making me feel really agitated and desperate, and it was making it impossible to change my thoughts.

So I'm still human. I haven't reached enlightenment. I'm not always super excited about my negative emotion. Sometimes I still resist it. But I'm much more able to sit with it and observe it and not react to it. And part of what I'm working on a lot these days is sitting with it, observing it, and being kind to myself while I'm doing that.

The same way that you would with a child who is in pain, not necessarily trying to fix it, but just being there to offer support and comfort and kindness to myself. Not freaking out, not trying to solve it immediately, but being willing to observe it and let it be with me on my journey.

And what I'm seeing is that so often, if I'm able to sit with an emotion without reacting to it, the scale and the scope of it changes so much over just a few hours, or maybe a few days. Things settle out, the dust clears, and my perspective returns. It becomes possible to coach myself.

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And I don't think that would be the case if I hadn't done all that work on changing my thoughts. So they're both important, but now when I have an intense flare of emotion, I know sometimes I just need to wait it out, let it pass, be kind and comforting to myself in that moment. That doesn't mean believing my story. Kind and comforting doesn't mean like, telling myself all my thoughts are true. It just means having compassion for myself.

Oh, I see I'm suffering, I see this is painful. I'm a witness to myself, I'm here with myself, I'm safe with myself. And then when the emotion starts to ebb, that's when my brain is able to kind of come back online and coach myself. But it's crucial to be able to ride the wave of emotion first without freaking out or trying to force coach myself to get away from it.

So on my best days, I can be genuinely curious and compassionate about my negative emotion. And one of the things I love about thought work is that it allows me to give such meaning to any suffering I experience. I get to always choose what I want to learn from having negative emotion. There's always growth or insight available to me, or even just practice of a skill that I want to get better at if I'm willing to look for it.

And that is what allows me to grow because I'm willing to move towards discomfort. I think there are some people who learn thought work and they use it to feel better, and then they're happy to just stay there, wherever they are. But some of us want to push ourselves past what seemed possible to us before. To me, that's what it means to blow your own mind.

it's to take the leap of faith that says that what you can now see or believe is only the faintest glimmer of what you really can achieve. So are you willing to dare to be wrong about what's possible for you? It's so interesting how much we cling to our own limiting beliefs. The human brain does not like to be wrong. It is our least favorite thing. But being wrong is almost always the best news ever.

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I have been wrong about so much. I was wrong about whether I could be a life coach. I was wrong about whether I could run a business. I was wrong about whether I could love life in my body. I was wrong about whether other people would love my body. I was wrong about what kind of partner I could find. I was wrong about how finding them would and wouldn't change my life. And I was wrong about my childhood. I was wrong about the kind of person I thought I was. I was wrong about what is possible for me.

And the best news to me is that right now, I'm wrong in ways I can't even see yet. Not morally wrong, just mistaken about what I believe is possible. And how incredible is that? I think the greatest gift that thought work has given me is unlimited optimism and excitement about the future.

I know now that I'm capable of things that I can't even imagine in my current brain. I'm capable of success that I can't see yet. I'm capable of love I haven't created yet for myself and for others. I'm capable of peace I haven't accessed yet. I'm capable of changing the world in ways I cannot imagine yet.

So I'm so glad to be wrong most of the time. If you want to be right, then you can be, and your life will stay the same as it is. But if you're willing to be wrong, everything can be different. That's the work that we're doing here. It's my mission to teach as many women as possible to embrace being as wrong as possible about what you can do, with what Mary Oliver, the poet, called your one wild and precious life.

So if you want to find out all the ways you are wrong, I want you to come join us in The Clutch. It is my sole purpose in life to teach you how to blow your own mind with how wrong you are about yourself and the world.

Go to www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch or you can just text your email to 347-934-8861 with your email and we will send you the link to all the information. 347-934-8861, just text us your email and we will text you back

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with a link to all the information. If you can't text, you just go online, unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. I'll see you there, my chickens.

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.