

UFYB 123: Your Brain on Patriarchy



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? I am great. I just got back from a weekend upstate actually, which was really nice. And then this evening I actually just had a long conversation with an old friend of mine and we were laughing because we've both been through a lot this year and we were joking that we were tired of growing and could we just get a hall pass and spend a while not having to grow.

But we were laughing about it because the truth is we've both made the kinds of life decisions and risks and choices that entail moving towards growth and what can look like disruption and dissolution in order to experience that discomfort of transformation and change. And I think that that's really what this thought work journey is truly all about, and what every kind of higher-level experience in life is about.

You guys know I'm a happy hedonist in some respects, so I'm not saying that our more primitive desires aren't worthy or valuable or fun, but in a lot of fun mental ways, we're wired to see comfort and pleasure and what is familiar. And I think that all of this self-development work and thought work and coaching is all about becoming the kind of person who moves towards discomfort and towards growth and towards the unfamiliar, which is challenging and hard.

It's such a paradox that being miserable can actually be deeply comfortable and familiar for some of us. And the emotions we most think we want to get away from, like anxiety or hopelessness or guilt to shame, they can actually be some of our most comfortable places to be because they're so familiar.

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 123: Your Brain on Patriarchy

The pathways are so well worn in our brains. And so for some of us to show up for love and for connection and for self-respect and self-acceptance and for compassion and for change can feel awkward and challenging and disruptive. And it can feel like it takes a lot of effort, even when we're trying to move towards what we want.

I mean, here's what I always remember, and that's what my friend and I were saying to each other, you can always opt out. You can choose a life of comfort and stability and familiar patterns. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. It's not a moral issue. Nobody's getting into heaven faster.

I don't even believe in heaven. But you can totally decide to just not really grow and do something else with your time. But if you want to choose the path of growth, what I want to tell you is don't whine that it's hard. No one is making you grow. You chose it. If it were easy, it wouldn't be growth and everyone would do it.

So that's your tough love pep talk for today. If you choose to grow, then just expect it's going to feel terrible and stop thinking something has gone wrong and complaining about it. That's my tough love pep talk for myself also. So the other thing I was doing upstate was starting to make notes for a book.

So I'm so excited about this. One of my goals this year is to write a book and I get lots of message from you all asking me to write one, so I know that some of you want to read it, and of course, I always aim to please. So I will be sharing lots more about that process of course, as I get going, and eventually when the book is available. You will all be the first to know, every step of the way.

While I was working on putting some notes together, one of the things I realized was that while I've given talks on this topic, I've never done a podcast episode specifically about the impact of patriarchy on your brain.

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 123: Your Brain on Patriarchy

Obviously almost every episode talks about this one way or another, but I thought it'd be helpful for you all to hear it kind of all in one place so you can really see the bigger picture.

So that's what I want to talk you through today. If you've been listening to the podcast, you've probably heard me talk about how your brain is kind of like open source code. Especially when you're growing up, meaning anybody can enter lines of code into it. You're born, you're a fairly blank slate, and then as a baby and a small child, your brain is growing so fast because you have to learn what everything is.

If you've been around babies recently, they constantly almost look stoned and they're blown away when they see a tree they've never seen before. Everything is new to them. Their brain is working so hard on figuring out the world and making meaning out of what's around them and figuring out what everything is.

And one way that your brain kind of tries to get itself organized and learn what things are are called heuristics. That's the technical term. It basically just means it's a shortcut in your brain. So your brain learns a shortcut for how to think about something and then it just uses that over and over, rather than spend energy on coming up with a new way to think about it every time.

Think about long division or something. Hopefully this is a good metaphor. I actually probably never correctly learned long division. But rather than look at a set of numbers and every time have to figure out like, well okay, how are these related and what are numbers and how do we divide and what is the symbol, we just know we use long division.

It's like an operation we apply to the numbers. That's kind of how a heuristic works in your brain. So for instance, you just learn over time kind of how to evaluate whether it seems safe to put something heavy on that

UFYB 123: Your Brain on Patriarchy

table or how to know how a door opens. We have a ton of different heuristics.

I'm really simplifying this right now because this is not a PhD psychology podcast. It actually doesn't really matter that you understand all the details of heuristics. I just want you to understand the idea that your brain trains itself and is trained by society and learns how to take kind of reasoning shortcuts so that you don't have to think about everything from scratch all the time.

So some of these heuristics are super useful. We learn how to kind of do some basic unconscious reasoning or evaluation of a lot of different things in our life. Like we can just look at a table and kind of know, does it seem stable to put this heavy thing on, right? Or how a door works. Whatever it is. Can I sit in that chair without it falling down? You don't even think about it consciously. You just look at it and you unconsciously have a heuristic, a shortcut to decide.

But some heuristics are not that useful. So to give you an example I've talked about on the podcast before, you've probably heard me talk about what's called the recency effect, where people overestimate the likelihood of something happening to them if they've heard about it recently.

So if there's been news coverage of a hurricane and you ask people to estimate how likely it is that a hurricane will hit them, they will way overestimate if they've heard about a hurricane recently. That is actually a heuristic. The technical name for it is the availability heuristic. It's because the information about the hurricane is very "available" to the brain because it's been recently introduced.

Like your brain just heard about hurricanes and so your brain thinks, "This must be relevant. This information is very available and present in my brain, it must be relevant." That's a heuristic. It's like a reasoning shortcut

UFYB 123: Your Brain on Patriarchy

that your brain is making. Your brain is like, “This information was just given to me. It must be relevant and important to this.”

That’s like a shortcut that your brain uses all the time but that can be very wrong. So you can totally go down a Googling rabbit hole if heuristics are interesting to you. I’m not going to get deep into them here because I’m really using the term in a looser way because I’m a life coach. Not a Nobel prize winner in psychology.

I don’t know if there is a Nobel prize in psychology. Probably not. I’m really always interested in how can we use ideas and metaphors to better understand the ways our brains are leading us astray. That’s always my goal. Utility over intellectual perfection. We’re all reformed perfectionists around here.

So anyway, one of the ways I like to use heuristics, which is accurate but also is kind of as a metaphor is just think of it as the brain’s shortcut for evaluating situations and proposing reasons and answers for them. It’s your brain’s shortcut for seeing problems and how to solve them.

Because this is something that our brain does all the time, and we aren’t even aware of how often it’s happening, and what kind of shortcuts we’re constantly relying on. So let me bring this back to patriarchy and your brain. So now we know your brain develops lots of heuristics, which are like reasoning shortcuts basically, unconscious reasoning shortcuts, that your brain uses so that it doesn’t have to try to figure everything out from scratch all the time.

So let’s apply this. Let’s say you’ve learned from social messaging and fairytales and books you were read and popular culture and advertisements and your older cousin and whoever else, that the most important thing in a woman’s life is romantic love. This is a message we get in society a lot. Most fairytales are about women finding their prince.

UFYB 123: Your Brain on Patriarchy

Most novels written for women, especially until recently are about women's love affairs. We are taught that romantic love is what makes a woman happy and fulfilled. And yeah, in modern times, we're also taught she can have a career and kids and whatever else, but we are really taught to for women, their romantic status is like, the central story and narrative and drama of their lives.

Just think about all the romantic comedies and chick flicks marketed to women because that story resonates with women. Because we're taught that that's what matters. So your brain absorbs that shortcut. So if you're socialized as a woman, your brain absorbs that romantic love equals happiness. That's a heuristic, it's a reasoning shortcut that your brain has absorbed.

And then what happens? So if you ever notice you're unhappy, if you have any negative emotion, your brain says, "Hey, I have a shortcut for that. I know why you're unhappy. It's your love life. So if you're single, it's because you don't have a romantic partner. If you have a romantic partner, it's because they're not the right one or they're not behaving the way they should."

Your brain has developed the shortcut that it was taught by society and patriarchy. If you're a woman, your romantic status is what determines your happiness. And then it applies that shortcut to solving the problem of your unhappiness all the time. And if you have ever paid attention to this, you'll notice, it's amazing how many things you will bring into this argument.

Like you go on a trip and you don't feel happy, and so you tell yourself, if you're single, "Well, I'm unhappy because look, there are all these other couples who are happy on the trip and I would enjoy travel more if I had a partner. It doesn't really count to go by myself." You are maybe unhappy because of any given thought you're having about anything.

UFYB 123: Your Brain on Patriarchy

You're tired, you're jet lagged, you're bored, you're just having a human moment, whatever it is. But your brain immediately tells you, "If you're unhappy, it's because you're single." And you're constantly thinking that. I'm single, I must not be happy. It's a vicious cycle.

So the problem is this is very ineffective because the premise is inaccurate. Because romantic love is not what determines your happiness. It's your thoughts. Let's take another example. Let's say you're taught that the way to earn love is by being thin. That all the affection and approval and validation you want is going to be based on your weight.

And that's a message that our society teaches everyone, but especially women, people socialized as women. So any time you feel lonely or alienated or rejected, what does your brain tell you? The truth is those feelings are being caused by your thoughts, just like if you're unhappy in my previous example, the feeling is really being caused by whatever thoughts you're thinking.

But your brain doesn't tell you that. It says, "Oh, it's because you're single." You don't even look at what the actual thoughts are. And if you feel lonely or alienated or rejected, and you've absorbed this shortcut about weight, then you think, "Well, it must be my weight. If I were just thinner, my parents would approve of me. If I were just thinner, I'd have an easier time finding dates. If I was just thinner, I would finally feel like I fit in and I belong and I'm normal."

That's what your brain tells you. That's its reasoning shortcut. Oh, you feel alienated, you feel rejected, you feel lonely, you feel like you're not approved of or validated, it's because of your weight. That's the shortcut. Your brain is just doing what it's trained to do. Solve a problem by blaming it on your weight.

UFYB 123: Your Brain on Patriarchy

But the problem you're trying to solve is just a feeling, which is not actually a problem. And your brain's shortcut solution wouldn't solve it even if it were something to be solved. Even if a feeling was a problem, it's not actually caused by your weight.

So these are just two examples of so, so many examples, but you get the picture. As we grow up, our brains are constantly trying to develop shortcuts for understanding the world and solving problems. And most of us are taught that our negative feelings are problems.

So whenever we have a negative feeling, we want to solve it, and when we think about how to solve it, we default to these unconscious heuristics, these learned and incorrect patterns of reasoning that our brain has picked up to make everything more efficient. To just be always able to pick the easiest explanation based on what we've been taught.

And this explains why it can be so confusing to be a feminist. Because on the one hand, we've become intellectually aware of society's messages about women, and we know that we've internalized them in some ways. But they impact us in ways that are subconscious. And even when they're kind of made conscious or they come to our consciousness, they just sound like our own thoughts.

So if you heard a booming male voice in your head say, "The reason you're sad is that you will never be fulfilled as a person until another person who has a penis has put a hoop of metal on your finger," you would not take that seriously. But that's not what you hear. What you hear is your own voice in your mind saying something like, "It's just really lonely when all my friends are married and I can't find someone. There must be something wrong with me. Why doesn't my love life ever work out?"

It sounds just like your own voice. That was obviously a very heteronormative example. We're talking about the heteronormative

UFYB 123: Your Brain on Patriarchy

messages that we absorb. The most insidious element of social conditioning is that it's not just an eight-track of recorded voices in your brain.

If it just played in the original form you heard it, if it was just that TV advertisement from when you were eight played in your brain, you could recognize it. But instead, it's more like lines of code that get programmed into your brain and then the program keeps running and the messages arise organically in your own voice as your own thoughts.

And those beliefs and lessons become mental habits and shortcuts that you don't even recognize as external. Because they're filtered through your own voice and experience. And you fit your own evidence and narrative to match them. Because we have learned on the podcast about cognitive bias and how our brain is always looking for evidence to prove what it already believes is true.

So it's your own brain that builds the story year after year, and all of your cognitive bias supports your brain in finding more and more evidence to "prove" the story true. So it just becomes totally not recognizable as the external social belief that was embedded in your subconscious. It just sounds like your own voice narrating the facts of your life and reality back to you.

So that is why you can have this kind of feeling of split consciousness where you intellectually believe one thing but you still emotionally feel so different. This is a huge topic obviously. It's something I'm going to write about a lot in the book because I can't fit everything into the podcast.

But I think that this description of what happens should give you a good starting place to work with this concept. So what I recommend is that you start looking around for the messages you see society teaching you, and

UFYB 123: Your Brain on Patriarchy

then you see how you might be deducing mental shortcuts from those messages that are not actually true.

First of all, the messages aren't true, but then also your reasoning based on the messages is inaccurate. Now, these shortcuts won't be conscious often. That's why it takes work to uncover the patterns. But you can start to notice the ways in which you have taken on board social beliefs, even if you think you don't believe them intellectually, and see how they're impacting your brain and the way you think about your life.

So if you're in The Clutch, this is a great topic to post about in the Facebook group. I think it will be a really juicy discussion for you all to share your observations about this with each other. If you're not in The Clutch, you might want to talk about this episode with a friend, but get some external perspective.

And if you want to join so you can nerd out about all this stuff with us, which is my favorite thing to do, you can totally join us now and join this conversation we'll be having in the Facebook group. Just text your email to +13479348861. +13479348861. You just text us your email address and we will send you a link right to your phone with all the information.

And if you can't or don't want to text, just go to unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. And I will see you all there and I'll talk to you next week.

If this episode spoke to you and you spend time thinking about how to change the world and make it a better place, you need to be in The Clutch because as a social justice lawyer myself, I know that what often derails movements and people who are trying to make a difference is that they end up succumbing to so much unwanted anger and resentment and burnout and exhaustion and catastrophizing and just so much negative emotion that

UFYB 123: Your Brain on Patriarchy

ends up burying and distorting all of the things that they wanted to do and achieve.

Learning how to manage your mind, how to process your emotions, and how to work with your thoughts is the way to create the change that you want to see, whether that's personally or professionally, in yourself or in the world, without burnout and without overwhelm and without giving up.

So come check it out. It's www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch, or you can just text your email to 347-934-886. There's so much work being done on how to change the world outside of us, but if we don't learn how to change our internal worlds too, we're never going to accomplish those external goals and we wouldn't even be able to recognize and achieve the path to them when we wanted to.