

# UFYB 124: Self-Improvement Shame



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## UFYB 124: Self-Improvement Shame

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. Are you pecking your way towards spring? I always find March confusing because in my brain, I think it's spring. I think winter is December, January, February, and then spring is March, April, May. And then it's very confusing because on the east coast, it's not spring.

It's a spring fake out, although actually it's been pretty mild this spring. So last week I was in LA, where it is always spring, and I did some podcast interviews I'm very excited for you all to hear. I always feel very fancy when I say I'm going to LA for work. It makes me feel like I'm a movie star or a film executive or something.

And this week I'm in Phoenix doing some Equus coaching with my friend Rachel and one of my siblings, which is always really fun. And then I go to Dallas for a workshop with my teacher and then I finally go home. It's been a long trip. That is what I have been up to.

And if you want to follow along with my travels, or if you want to make sure that you get the heads up about those podcast interviews I did, one of which was about sex, which I know a lot of you have lots of questions about, thought work and sex, you want to follow me on Instagram is the point.

Anywhere on social media, but particularly Instagram because we do share my interviews on Facebook and Instagram when I do other podcast interviews, but when I travel, I post to my stories all the time about where I'm going and the restaurants and what I see and what I'm doing. Bathtub

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porn. I have a thing for really nice bathtubs. Cat pictures, you know, it's the life-changing content that you come to me for.

And then of course, little bonus teachings too. #priorities. I think that's what Instagram - hashtags? That's what we do on Instagram. I will be honest with you. I am not an Instagram expert. But I actually use my stories all the time. It's super fun. And it's a great way - I get to communicate with you guys and hear a lot of you post my teachings or post your thoughts on the podcast or post your thought work and I get to share that. It's just a nice little community to have.

So come follow me over on Instagram. It's just @karaloewentheil. All one word, just my name. There's only like, nine Loewentheils in the country, related to all of them. So come find me there. Alright, that's your homework. No segue. So today I want to talk about a phenomenon that is so common among my students that it really needs its own episode, so that's what it's getting today.

And that is what I call self-improvement shame. SIS, if you want to give it a syndrome abbreviation. So a lot of my students, and probably many of you listening discovered this work and resonated with it because there were things you wanted to change about your life and yourself.

And that impulse can be an incredible thing. It can be motivating, it can be growth-inducing. It can be really healing and joyous to learn how to actually change your thinking on purpose and create an amazing life that you want to have. But the dark side of the process is that sometimes, that initial reaching for something better has mixed motivations.

I think often there are some true motivations of self-love and wanting to grow and evolve and wanting to really - we know there must be a more skillful way of being a human and getting through this life, and we know

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there must be a way to kind of I think, bring out both the peace and the dynamism that we think we might have within us.

But there's also often this mixed motivation with shame and self-rejection and self-alienation and low self-esteem, to give it the kind of mainstream term. So many of us come to any kind of transformational practice, whether it's yoga or meditation or coaching or even therapy because we want to make ourselves better. And I don't just mean better as in like, more functional and healed. I mean better as in we think morally better, more worthy, more acceptable.

We want to be fixed. We want to finally be good enough. Brené Brown talks about what it's like when we're hustling for our worthiness from other people, which is something very important to notice when we're doing. I talk about that in other episodes, but it's so important to see that really, what we're hustling for is we're hustling for worthiness from ourselves.

When we come to self-improvement, we're trying to hustle for our worthiness to get our own approval, our own acceptance. We're trying to show ourselves that we can become good enough to finally accept ourselves. And sometimes we project that onto our teacher, or whoever is leading us in this practice, and we hustle for their approval, or the approval of the other people in the practice.

But fundamentally, we're trying to use whatever method we've adopted to get good enough to finally feel okay about ourselves. And that is why we end up using thought work sometimes to try to fix our self-perceived flaws. So if we think we get angry too often, we want to use thought work to make ourselves less angry.

If we think we don't get enough done at work, we want to use thought work to get more done. If we think we're lazy overeaters, we want to use thought work to make ourselves go to the gym and cut the carbs. What you notice

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is that these are all the ways that we think we need to change ourselves that we can finally feel okay about ourselves.

And we've tried other things to create these different actions that haven't worked. Sometimes this is obvious and sometimes it can be kind of insidious and hidden, I think. Like we'll tell ourselves that we want to eat a certain way just because it makes us "feel better," but what we don't realize is that often we feel better not because of what we're eating but because when we manage to stick to a restrictive diet for a few days, we have a totally different set of thoughts about ourselves. That's what we're really after.

Not saying that certain foods don't feel different in our bodies. Obviously, they do. But there's the emotional impact of your thoughts about what you're eating. There's no - the feeling better that we're after, the physical feeling better of the food choices pales in comparison to the emotional feeling better of the kinder thoughts that we only allow ourselves to think when we eat a certain way.

Or we'll tell ourselves that we want to love our bodies, but secretly, it's because we think we should love our bodies and we're ashamed of ourselves that we don't. So we want to just hurry up and love the body already so that we can feel good about ourselves for loving our bodies.

Or we'll tell ourselves we want to be on our phones less because we want to be present with our kids or our partner, but we're actually mostly being motivated by the guilt that we create for ourselves with our thoughts about how if we were better partners or better parents, we'd pay more attention.

So you have to really practice discernment to see why you want to change yourself. What is it that you really are after? Because you will sometimes have mixed motivations for a goal. Or it might be a goal you actually would

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still want to achieve or work towards even if you liked yourself, if you weren't operating out of guilt or shame.

The problem is you cannot change yourself from a mixed motivation. You can't achieve a goal from a mixed motivation. It's like one drop of poison poisons the whole well. As soon as you're trying to improve yourself to get away from shame or change your feelings about yourself, you've put yourself in an impossible situation.

And then you double down because you come to self-improvement work from a place of shame and trying to fix yourself. You want to use coaching or self-coaching or my work or thought work or some other discipline to feel better about yourself, to become good enough so you can feel okay about yourself. You're not looking to develop self-compassion. You're looking to become a better person so that you can finally be nice to yourself.

But because you're coming from that place of shame, what happens? Of course you just start to develop shame about your own self-improvement process. You hear what I'm saying? You come to this "self-improvement" - let's say you want to learn thought work because you want to improve yourself so you can like yourself.

But because you're coming from this place of trying to get away from your shame, you immediately just start shaming yourself about how you're doing thought work. It's like if you plug in yoga, you're like, "If I just went to yoga three times a week, I could feel good about myself." So you start going to yoga and then you miss a day and then what do you do? You shame yourself because you missed it.

You start to just shame yourself about that same self-improvement activity you were trying to do to finally become good enough to not have to shame yourself. You just shame yourself about how you're doing that whole

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process. You start to develop shame about your progress, about your process. So now you have a double layer of shame.

You will always create more of what you believe. That's what the coaching model shows us. Whatever you believe, you create more of it and you find more evidence of it to prove it true. So if you come to this work because your belief is, let's say, I'm lazy and I need to learn discipline, and you want to learn a tool to change that for you, you want to learn a tool that will make you not lazy.

You want to learn a tool that will make you into a disciplined person so that you can finally feel okay about yourself. But you, the person who wants to use that tool, haven't changed your original thought about yourself that you're lazy and need discipline. So what happens? You don't magically become a different person overnight. You can't because you've never changed that initial thought you have about yourself.

You just think it's true that you're lazy and need discipline and then you want to learn a tool to make yourself a non-lazy person with lots of discipline. So you never change your original thought you have about yourself, that you're lazy and you need discipline.

So then the minute that you don't magically transform, you just take that to be more evidence that you're lazy and un-self-disciplined. So for example, if you have the thought I'm lazy, and then you come to thought work and you think okay, amazing, I'm going to use this thought work to stop being lazy so I can feel good about myself.

You start with that thought. Now, that thought may not be conscious because you actually believe that's just a true thing about you, so your thought might be like, "I'll use this to stop being lazy." Whatever it is. You may be more or less conscious of exactly what the thought is, but either way, the reason you're coming to thought work is because you believe

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you're lazy and you want to stop being lazy so you can feel good about yourself.

And what happens is you totally skip over the part where I teach you about curiosity and non-judgment and acceptance and you find some tool that seems to relate to being lazy, so it might be the minimum baseline, which I have a whole podcast episode about.

So maybe you get to that workbook in The Clutch and you're like, oh great, here's the tool I'm going to use to stop being lazy. I'm going to set a minimum baseline for myself, I'm going to exercise for half an hour a day. And meanwhile, you're not exercising at all right now, and you haven't done any investigation really into why you're getting that current result.

Because your thought is just, "Well, I'm lazy. There's this problem about me as a person and I'm just going to use the tool to fix it." And so you skip over the part where you need to be non-judgmental and curious, where you could actually find out well, why don't I exercise? Do I want to exercise? What are my thoughts about it? What are the thoughts I have that are preventing me from exercising?

You haven't gotten curious at all. You've just grabbed onto this tool and you want a hammer with it to fix yourself. And then shockingly, what happens is exactly what's happened every other time you've set an exercise goal. You can't keep up with it because you really haven't done anything differently.

You've come to thought work, which is about curiosity and non-judgment and compassion and acceptance of yourself before you change anything, and you've skipped all of that and just tried to use it as another way to try to discipline yourself and then you beat yourself up for not magically becoming more disciplined.



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And then again, instead of getting curious and practicing compassion and non-judgment and actually learning what's happening in your brain, you just double down on the shame. And then you add being ashamed that you're doing thought work wrong and you're not coaching yourself well enough.

So you've got the self-improvement comes from a shameful place, you're trying to improve yourself out of shame, and then when that doesn't magically work, of course, because shame is created by your own thoughts and you haven't changed them, you then just shame yourself for not being amazing at thought work and changing everything immediately.

So I know some of you are nodding along right now, like, yeah, that is exactly what I have been doing. Here's what you have to know; if you come to self-coaching because you're trying to change yourself so you won't feel ashamed, you are always going to end up feeling ashamed about your own progress, your self-coaching, your thought work journey, and whatever you were feeling ashamed about before.

You have to see that. When you're motivated by shame, you are not questioning the thought causing shame. You are just trying to change your actions to stop feeling shame, and that isn't the direction that the model flows. We cannot change the actions to change the feeling.

And so thought work, what has become one more thing you've tried, one more thing that you tried to make yourself more acceptable and make yourself finally feel good enough, that didn't work. It will never work when you haven't done the foundational thought work to actually observe and have compassion for and accept and change your own thoughts about yourself.

You can use thought work to feel better about yourself. I recommend that you do that. But it's the thought work that will make you feel better about

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yourself and it's the thought work about your thoughts about yourself. That's what has to change.

Thought work is not just another tool to try to force or magically change all your actions so that you can finally change your thoughts about yourself. I'm going to say that again. It is everything. Thought work is not a tool to use to change your actions so that you can finally think something nice about yourself. It's the other way around.

You will only ever feel better about yourself when you change your thoughts about yourself. Not when you try to use thought work to just change your actions so you can feel better. So not when you try to use thought work to become a better person, so you can finally be nice to yourself.

Thought work will only ever help you when you have stopped judging yourself for your current thoughts, feelings, and actions. If you are in a rush to get away from your self-judgment, all you will produce is more self-judgment. And that's why I call this self-improvement shame because if you try to execute self-improvement from a place of shame and rejection of yourself, all you will produce is more shame and more rejection of yourself.

I don't even like the term self-improvement because you don't need to improve. There isn't anything wrong with you. Just the fact that you think you need to improve is evidence that you're coming from the shame-based place, that you're not good enough now.

There's a big difference between growth and improvement as concepts. I talk a lot about curiosity versus judgment, and I think this is very analogous to that. Growth means change, evolution, learning. It doesn't make you a better person. It doesn't mean you're improved. You didn't go from a C to an A. There's no rating. Who would even evaluate that?

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We're not getting a certified letter from the universe. There's inherent judgment in the concept of improvement. I think growth and change are actually agnostic, that they don't have a value attached. I mean, when flowers grow, we like it. When viruses grow, we don't like it. They're both just growing. It's only our evaluation of the change or growth where the judgment comes in.

Without that judgment, it's just change. Now, I personally like to move towards change and growth usually because I think it's new and I learn something new and I have a human brain and that's what it likes to do. But it's not morally superior, and it's not about improvement or becoming good enough. It's just for fun.

So if you are creating self-improvement shame for yourself, I really hope that this episode will be a wake-up call for you. You cannot use thought work or any other transformational practice if your motivation for transforming yourself is to stop shaming yourself. If you want to transform so that you can stop shaming yourself. It's the other way around.

When you stop shaming yourself, that's when you can transform. That is the transformation. You cannot use thought work to outrun your shame. Shame will always move faster than that because you're creating more and more of it in your mind. It's a never-ending resource. And it moves faster than you can act.

The only way to stop shaming yourself is to change your thoughts about the you that you are right now. Not to change your thoughts to become a better person so that you can finally stop shaming yourself. You have to change the thoughts creating shame now. Not to make yourself better or good enough, but just to accept yourself and maybe even love yourself.

It's only after you do that that you will actually be able to make any of the behavior changes that you think you want right now. It's only after you've

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stopped shaming yourself that you'll actually even know what you truly give a fuck about and how to create it in a loving way. You will never be able to use thought work to change yourself enough to stop shaming yourself.

Your shame does not come from the kind of person you are. It comes from the thoughts about yourself. The true transformation is changing those thoughts you have about who you are right now. That's what will transform you. If you're in The Clutch, I want you to come post in the Facebook group or submit for coaching in the membership site about where you see this coming up in your thought work journey because I guarantee it's coming up for 99% of you.

And if you're not in The Clutch, that's silly and you should come join us. It's [unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch](http://unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). Either way, have a beautiful week, my chickens. I will talk to you next week and remember that you cannot run yourself on the fuel of shame. You have got to transmute that into the clean renewable energy of self-acceptance.

If this episode spoke to you, then you need to check out The Clutch because it comes with a five-week self-coaching course that will walk you through exactly how to apply this life-changing work to anything you experience. Literally anything. If you've ever thought, "Well, I don't know how to get started with thought work or I don't know exactly how to do thought work or if I'm doing it right, or what order I should do it in or how I should do it," the self-coaching course teaches you all of that.

And even if you're familiar with thought work concepts, The Clutch will help you take the work deeper, and it comes with access to expert coaches who can answer any thought work question you have. Plus, me, of course, to coach you live. No question is off limits. You can change your life by going to [unfuckyourbrainn.com/theclutch](http://unfuckyourbrainn.com/theclutch), or you can actually just text your email address to 347-934-8861 and we will send a link to all the information you need straight to your cellphone. I'll see you there.

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