

UFYB 127: How to Know What You Want



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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'm sure that a lot of you are still experiencing a lot of thoughts and feelings about the global situation and I thought about this a lot, but I decided that it was really important to me to keep doing our regular podcast content because part of what I am trying to teach you is that just because your brain is fixated on something doesn't mean it's the only thing in the world.

Most of us are going to make it through this just fine and life is always going to go on, whether we're part of it or not, and whatever time we have is the time we have to show up the way we want, create the experience that we want. That's always true.

And so I am doing the special limited series of Turn Panic Into Peace and we are doing that to help you, not because the circumstance means everything is terrible now, but just because everybody's brains are losing it. I am also going to keep doing the regular Thursday content because I know that that's important, and that some of you maybe are not really freaking out or don't have a lot of thoughts about the virus or your life isn't that different and you want to be working on other things.

And even those of you who are seeing a lot of change and are having a lot of mental fixation on it, I really want to encourage you to think about other things sometimes too, not just be constantly thinking about the news.

So with that said, that's why today we are going to talk about something I get asked about all the time. This comes up in The Clutch all the time with

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my students, and it's such an interesting question because I think some people never struggle with this or ask themselves this question, and some people have this question all the time, and that is how to know what you really want.

So something that comes up often with my students is that they start doing thought work and they become aware of just how much they've been kind of living their lives based on what they think they should do. And then if I ask them, "Okay well, what do you want to do?" And that might be what do you want to do about going to this baby shower or what do you want to do with your career or do you want to have a partner or have kids.

Big or little picture questions. Or what do you want to have for lunch? They have no idea how to answer that because everything has been based on what they think they should or are supposed to do. They don't know what they want outside their thoughts about what they think they have to do, what they think they should do, or what they want to do to try to control what other people think about them.

And then they get themselves even more confused because thought work teaches us that our thoughts are optional. So some of my students kind of misunderstand this and they think, "Well, if all my thoughts are optional, then there's no such thing as really wanting something. How would I even know if I wanted it? Or if I just think I want it?"

I could have called myself the coach for over-thinkers or over-analyzers. I used to probably identify as an over-analyzer. Of course, I didn't think I was over-analyzing. I thought I was analyzing the right amount. And so many of my students get themselves all tied up in knots on this question too.

So I want to really break down for you what it means to want something, how to know what you want, and how to decide whether to keep wanting that thing. So here's the first kind of mind-fuck of this topic is that we are

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used to defining what we want by thinking about the things we want in order to feel differently.

When we're coming from an unmanaged mind, anything we want, we want because we think it will give us a positive feeling, or it will make a negative feeling go away now or in the future. We're just kind of living out this primitive seek pleasure and avoid pain dynamic. And so we're wanting or not wanting anything in our lives from a snack to a PhD based on those premises.

So we might be trying to get a good taste in our mouths from the snack, or we might be trying to get the self-esteem that we think would come if our peers were impressed with our PhD. It doesn't matter. Fundamental motivation is the same.

Sometimes we just want physical pleasure, sometimes it's a set of feelings that we want. And we think we need this circumstance of having the PhD or having this career or whatever it is to have those feelings. And women especially I think are socialized to often be acting out of obligation or guilt or responsibility.

I had this fascinating conversation with a boyfriend once where we were talking about how I really value verbal articulation of feelings, and that he tended to express his feelings through actions. Kind of caretaking actions, like making sure I was not too hot and not too cold, or bringing me water the way he knows I like my water, whatever it is.

And he said he didn't understand why his actions weren't enough because his thought was if I ask questions about his feelings, that meant that his actions weren't enough, that I wasn't valuing them. And I explained to him that my thought process was totally different because women are socialized to do things they don't want to do all the time.

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And so I think often to women, someone doing something for us, that's not an obvious sign of love or affection because we know that we do things out of guilt and obligation and insecurity and fear and anxiety all the time. Of course, people of all genders do this. But I do think women are socialized to more often do things that they don't want to do, out of trying to make other people happy or being afraid of upsetting them, or just what we're taught to think about ourselves.

But I think women are socialized to more often do things that they don't want to do out of fear of upsetting others or trying to make them happy, making other people happy. We're just our own internal constant self-critical dialogue and just trying to kind of assuage our own brain, our own anxiety.

And so this was just a perfect example because that had never occurred to him. And he said, "Well, if I'm doing something, it's only because I want to do it." But that wasn't obvious to me. I had a different thought about it. So the first step is figuring out why you're doing what you're doing.

What are the thoughts driving your actions? And if you're using the model that I teach, if you're in The Clutch or if you've learned it from one of the free webinars, you can plug the action that you're taking in the A line of the model and work backwards. What are you feeling? What are you thinking?

And what most of you will find is that you're taking most of your actions in order to try to, number one, change your own feelings, or number two, control what other people think or feel. And that really goes back to number one, to change how you feel because of your thoughts about what they think or feel.

So that might be anything from volunteering to bake brownies for a bake sale to taking a CEO gig or getting married or getting an eyelash perm or saying yes to a cocktail party or a board seat or a haircut. Anything. Often

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you're trying to change how you feel or you're always trying to change how you feel and then even when you're trying to control how other people think or feel, it's still because of how you want to think and feel if you could control how they think or feel.

And this applies for things you're thinking about doing too. Why are you considering doing them? You have to ask yourself what you imagine you would get to think or feel if you did them. Those imaginary thoughts and feelings are why you're considering your actions, doing or not doing whatever the thing is.

So let's say you discover that you're doing something because you think you should. Like you are applying for a promotion because you think you should. Or you are quitting your job to stay home with your kids because you think you should.

Or you discover you're doing something to try to control someone else's feelings, like you're going to go to a party that you don't want to go to because you don't want the other person to think you're rude. Or you're trying to avoid a negative feeling like guilt or shame, so you are saying no to dessert because you don't want to feel bad about yourself later if you eat it.

So let's say you discover something like that. So then the question is now what? How do you determine what you actually want? So one way to think about it is that what you actually want is what you would do in the absence of acting out of guilt or obligation or insecurity or shame.

So let's say for instance you went to medical school because you thought you should and you thought your parents wanted you to. You don't really know what you want to do. All you know is you'd never had any preexisting desire from your own mind to go to medical school.

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And you know that because if you imagine a world without any of that perceived pressure, a world where nobody else thought you should go to medical school, it just wouldn't have occurred to you to go. It's not something you would do.

So, see what I'm saying? It's like you have to sort of use your imagination and do this kind of imaginary exercise of if I didn't have these thoughts that were motivating me to do it in a way that doesn't feel good to me, that feels like obligation or like should-ing, or shame or guilt, or trying to control other people, if I didn't feel this sense of doing something that I don't really want to do, would it ever have occurred to me to do this thing?

Another way to ask yourself the question is if you were going to feel the same, whether you did the thing or not, would you do it? If you could feel totally good about yourself whether you went to medical school or not, whether you got married or not, whether you had kids or not, whatever it is, whether you ate the tuna sandwich or not, if you didn't care what other people thought of your choice, would you still do it?

That is one way to tell if you actually want to do something. So the kind of obvious objection that I get from my clients sometimes, and I totally think it's a good question is, "Well, whatever my natural thought is about doing something is still just a thought."

If you never had any preexisting desire to go to medical school without all of your thoughts about how your parents want you to or you should or it would be prestigious or you could make money and feel safe that way, if you never had any of those thoughts, you just didn't have the desire because you didn't happen to have a thought that you wanted to be a doctor.

You didn't organically have that thought. That's all that means. It doesn't mean you're truly meant to be one thing or another necessarily. It just

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means you never had that thought. You could decide to cultivate that thought on purpose.

But here's where I think it's so interesting that my clients get so stuck on this because my students I see get stuck get stuck on the idea that any thought that they have or don't have, wanting to do something or not wanting to do something in an organic way, meaning it never would have organically occurred to them to do the thing if it wasn't coming from a negative motivation, or it just happened to organically occur to them that they would like to a certain thing, they don't think that's a good enough reason.

So they use thought work kind of against themselves, so they say to themselves or they say to me, "Well, so I have this unconscious thought, it's conscious but I didn't create it on purpose, it was just there. My brain just created it. This thought that let's say I want to be a choreographer instead of a doctor. Well, that's just still a thought so I could just change it."

And so they think well, everything's just thoughts. That's true, but I actually think in a weird way, it's proof of how much women are socialized to think that they have to have a good enough reason for doing anything that they would want to do.

It's like we learn thought work and then we use it against ourselves to sort of tell ourselves that we can change any of our thoughts, and so just wanting to do something isn't a good enough reason, and I don't think you find men having that thought as much.

So I kind of think it's a way that people socialized as women kind of take thought work and use it - it's like women are taught to think that their desires don't matter anyway. And so then you learn thought work and then you're like, well, my desires are just thoughts so I should just change them.

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It's like you actually still are having that same programming and you're just sort of coopting thought work into it. Just organically, in the sense of your brain came up with this thought without you doing it on purpose, wanting to do something or not do something, it's a good enough reason.

I'm not saying that's always the reason you want to go with. We want to question our thoughts, but you don't need a bigger justification. It's like, think about how I teach that you know if you believe a thought. You believe a thought if you have a feeling about it in your body.

Why do some of us believe certain thoughts and not others? One thought will work really well for one person, they'll have a big emotional response to it and it will do nothing for someone else. Why is that? I have no idea. To me, that is the greatest thought work mystery. I don't know why that's the case, but I don't think it really matters.

I think that body compass is the key to knowing what you really want. So yeah, it's all just thoughts, but at the root of it, there is some mystery there if why certain thoughts work for some of us versus others. And I think that body compass is the key to knowing what you really want.

Because I think the idea that you don't know what you really want is a like a red herring. I think we do know what we want, but we have distanced ourselves from it. So yeah, it's just a thought, what we want, the thing that we want, but it's a thought that produces a feeling for us that we believe.

The dangerous lie is in telling yourself that you don't know what it is. So that doesn't mean that just because you have a thought of wanting something, you should do everything you want to do. You have to use your prefrontal cortex and you have to use your discernment to decide.

You might want to eat something poisonous, but that's a bad idea. You might want to cheat on your partner in a moment, but then you don't really

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want to do that in a bigger sense. So when I say knowing what you want, I'm not talking about at the level of an urge for pleasure or being impulsive.

I'm talking about the level of a dream and vision for your life. That's where I think we lie to ourselves. We don't lie to ourselves about wanting a piece of chocolate cake. Whether we eat it or not, we know that we want it. But we lie to ourselves about the kinds of relationships we want, the kind of work we want to do in the world, the kind of impact we want to have, the kind of rest and relaxation that we want.

We lie to ourselves about the big things for so many reasons. We don't think we deserve to have what we want. We judge what we want. We judge ourselves for wanting it. We think we have to have a reason or a justification to do what we want.

We don't think it's possible to do what we want or to have what we want. We've absorbed so many messages from society and our parents and our friends, some of it, which is even well meaning, that tells us to be sensible, be reasonable, don't dream too big, don't get too big for your bridges, don't be selfish, don't be delusional.

We squash down our dreams and our desires and our potential because we're scared to actually dream big. And then we call it being confused or not knowing what I want. It's not true. You do know. And if you can't hear your own voice telling you what you want, it's because you've been drowning it out for so long.

So you have to develop the capacity, the skill, the practice of listening to that, of getting to know your own body and mind, and your own thoughts and feelings. You may have a lot of thoughts to clear out before you can get down to those kind of thoughts that do tell you what you want, that do indicate what you would want to do in the absence of all the other thoughts, if you believed you could do it or you could have it.

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And that's fine. That is work that is so well worth doing. But you have to just make sure that you don't buy your own bullshit that you don't know. You do know. You're just learning to understand. So ask yourself, what would I do if I knew I could succeed? What would I do if no one else would ever know about it and have any thoughts about it?

What would I do if I thought everyone in my life would approve of me and my decision? What would I do if I already loved myself no matter what and I knew I would love myself no matter what happened? The answers to those questions are some of the things that you really want, and the rest are all the thoughts holding you back.

And that's okay. You may not even be ready to go after what you really want yet. My friend and fellow coach Corinne Crabtree says, "If you can't dream big, start with dreaming small." So what's something small that you can tell yourself the truth about wanting and try to get?

Is it flowers? Is it a date? Is it to publish a blog post? Is it to sing karaoke? Whatever it is, start small and work your way up. Do something you want every day. And watch your life start to grow. And I think now more than ever is the time to stop wasting time, pretending you don't know what you want, pretending you don't know who you want to be, trying to live a life that will control what everyone else thinks of you and make you feel safe because life is always change and always unpredictable.

And so who do you want to be and what do you want to create and how do you want to show up? There's no time to waste pretending that you don't know the answers to those questions. Believe that you do know and you will figure it out. Alright my chickens, I'll talk to you next week.

If you're loving what you're learning in the podcast, you have got to come check out The Clutch. The Clutch is my feminist coaching community for all things Unfuck Your Brain. It's where you can get individual help applying all

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these concepts I teach to your own life and learning how to do thought work to blow your own mind.

It's where you can learn new coaching tools not shared on the podcast that will change your life even more. It's where you can hang out and connect over all things thought work with other podcast chickens just like you and me. It's my favorite place on earth and it will change everything, I guarantee it.

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