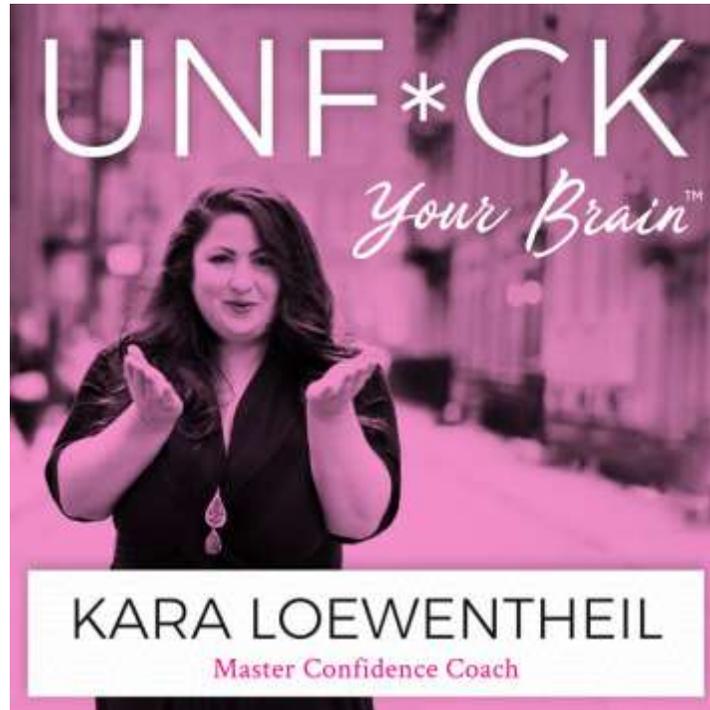


Your Brain In A Pandemic (Turn Panic Into Peace Series #1)



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.

Welcome everyone to this limited series, Turning Panic into Peace. So the first thing to know, if you don't usually listen to my podcast is that I call my listeners chickens. I will usually say hello my chickens. We're going to keep that going here. There's not a good reason for it, but that's how it is.

Alright, so here's the first thing I want to teach you all. I know that a lot of us are experiencing an enormous amount of stress and anxiety these days, and I want to talk to you about what is happening inside your brain right now.

So we evolved from smaller animals with less complex brains whose brains are mostly focused on staying alive. So we have actually a structure in our brain called the amygdala. It's a more primitive part of our brain. And primitive meaning it evolved earlier. It's older. We share it more with other animals.

So from a more primitive animal state. And its entire job is to scan your environment basically for threats to your life, to look for danger. That is what activates when you see or think about danger. It's a part of your brain that is really focused on just keeping you alive.

So your brain is evolutionarily predisposed, or designed, if that's what you believe. Either way, it is predisposed to be completely obsessed with anything that might be a danger to you. So if you think about it, if you are like, a little furry animal running around and there's something out there on

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the horizon, six feet away - if you're a little animal, that's your horizon - that's going to eat you, of course you're going to be hyper-focused on it.

And the animals that were hyper-focused on that survived more. And so that got passed on and evolved. So all that is to say your brain has evolved, this part of your brain has evolved to be hyper-focused and fixated on danger. That's its job.

So some of us experience a lot of that in daily life. We have a lot of anxiety or fear. Our brains are always looking for things that might go wrong. For some of us, this is kind of new. We haven't maybe lived through something that has activated that before, and so it's all kind of a crazy new experience.

But either way, what you have to understand is when your brain is manufacturing a lot of stress and anxiety about the coronavirus, COVID-19, or really anything else, it's actually doing its job. It hasn't malfunctioned. That's what that part of your brain is supposed to do. That's not your whole brain.

So I'm going to talk in a minute about how to bring your prefrontal cortex, the higher thinking part of your brain online to help you. But you just want to understand like, nothing has gone wrong. This is what your brain has evolved to do. And it's going to unavoidably do that if you don't take control of it.

And part of the problem right now is that you have a brain that's already predisposed to fixate on what might be dangerous to it, so now we're in a situation where you have that part of your brain doing what it was evolved to do. And now we're in this tornado of news and social media that is constantly offering you, it's like, live-streaming updates about the danger.

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So if you just imagine if you lived before all of that and you were occasionally worried about being eaten by a lion, but now instead of just only seeing the lion when it actually got close to you and then being freaked out about it, instead, you are constantly getting text updates about exactly where the lion was, what they were doing, how many other people they had eaten, what the statistics were on being eaten by lions.

We're going to get a constant stream of information, much of which is just the same information over and over again. And not only that, but there's this bias inherent in it because the media is doing exactly what it's supposed to do. I am for sure not anti-media. I respect journalists. I think it's an important job.

But media is a business like anything else, and so the media makes more money off of advertising when people pay more attention. And you know, a lot of media companies are struggling in modern times. So particularly when there's something that will captivate people, they are just going to be constantly pushing "news" about it, even when there isn't really much news about it, even when they're just telling you the same thing over and over, or a slightly different angle on it.

And so we get very little news about the positive, and there have been studies about this. News networks that focus on the positive don't make money because that's just not how human brains work. We are fixated and obsessed on what might be harmful. And so when the media can feed us a constant stream of something maybe being a danger to us, we will keep clicking over and over and over again.

And I know that some of you, especially if you are working from home or not working right now are just consuming media and social media constantly. And then social media is the same way. If you're someone who clicks on a lot of those articles and tends to get fixated on this, then the social media algorithms just keep showing you more of that.

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And then there's all this group think that happens and the social contagion of anxiety. So we've got a situation where the primitive part of your brain isn't equipped to deal with this, and it's being subjected to so much overstimulation that it doesn't know how to deal with.

And so the point of all of that is to say that even though your anxiety and fear feel very real to you and unfortunately, everyone around you is validating that by also losing their minds, I'm not saying that we shouldn't take the virus seriously in the sense of doing what we can to prepare, practicing what the experts tell us, those are actions.

But the overwhelming fear and anxiety is not actually representative of how much danger you are actually in. It is not actually necessary and it isn't what our brain acts like or talks to us like it's just doing this very objective analysis and evaluation of what you should think about and how much, as if it's like, omniscient and smart about it.

And it's so important to understand that's not true. That what's happening is your primitive brain is being hacked by not maliciously, but nevertheless, by a negative program that is then running wild. So what do we do about this? We have to bring our prefrontal cortex, a part of our brain that can reason and that can take a longer perspective and that can use complex thought, we have to bring that online and use it to try to reason with ourselves.

It's the first step. And through the course of this series, I'm actually going to teach you a lot of different tools for doing that. How to deal with all of your emotions, how to work on your thoughts, but what I really want to start with today is just to teach you the difference between a circumstance and a thought.

It's such an important difference. And when you don't know it, you believe everything you think to be true. So the first thing that we have to do is

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distinguish between all of the catastrophizing thoughts that our amygdala is screaming at us, and what we actually know to be true outside of us.

So for instance, let's say you read an article about a prediction about how many people may get the virus, and you start to freak out because your thoughts are, "Everyone's going to get the virus, I'm going to get the virus, everyone I know is going to get the virus and die, we're never going to recover, the economy is going to collapse, I'm going to die alone. I shouldn't have broken up with my ex-boyfriend or girlfriend, I should have gotten a dog, now I'm going to be here by myself, no one will ever find my body."

All of that. All of those are just thoughts. They're sentences in your mind. That's all a thought is. It's a sentence in your mind. The fact is an epidemiologist with this name made this prediction about what might happen.

Even just that sentence, the difference between John Smith, who is an epidemiologist made this prediction about what number of people might get sick. That sentence is not that scary. That's an actual circumstance that happened. A person said this thing. All of your cascade of thoughts that are you believing to be true and believing to be fact are actually what are freaking you out so much.

So there's a big difference between a statement that is actually neutral and objective, what actually happened without any interpretation or opinion, and then there's all of your thoughts about it. And so the first thing that is important to practice is writing down - I don't recommend you try to do it without writing it down. I really do recommend you write it down.

If, for some reason, you don't have pen and paper, you can do it in your head. But getting all of your thoughts out on paper and then looking at what can you 100% know factually is true and what is just thoughts. Now listen,

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when I say what is just thoughts, thoughts are powerful in that they cause a lot of intense emotion for us.

Our thoughts are what create our feelings, so it's your own thoughts about the virus that are creating all of your anxiety and fear. So they're powerful, but they are not always true. They are not facts. They're not circumstances. They're sentences in our mind and we know that because people have different thoughts about the same thing.

The virus exists and different people have very different thoughts about it. So that's what I want to recommend you do first is get all of those thoughts down, look through them, sort through them, and really pull out, what is an actual fact and circumstance, and then what are all of my thoughts?

And when you keep doing this practice, you start to get some perspective on the fact that your thoughts are just optional sentences in your mind, and you'll see, you'll even have contradictory ones. You'll have thoughts like, "This is all going to be terrible, we're all going to die," and, "I think we're all going to get through this okay."

Sometimes within the same hour. Those can't both objectively be true, right? They're just two thoughts, two ideas, two imaginings, two future speculations about whatever the actual circumstance is now, which is the virus exists, this many people have it that we know of, this many people have died, this epidemiologist said this. Even this news article said this, that's a circumstance.

This news article said this sentence. All of your thoughts about that, all of your catastrophizing about what might happen, all of your thoughts about fear and anxiety, those are all thoughts. Those are all just sentences in your mind. And the first step to learning how to turn all of your panic into more peace is learning how to distinguish between what is a fact and what is a thought.

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And this is so important so that you can start to see that your brain is kind of hyper-vigilant right now and hyperaware of danger and looking for it everywhere, but that doesn't mean that all of your thoughts are accurate and true. Just because you think something doesn't mean it's true.

In fact, most of what you think is not true, is just made up, or is a guess, or is speculation, or is interpretation, or is your opinion that other people wouldn't agree with. Most of it is not actually objective circumstances and facts. And what you will find is that if you can train your brain, once you start to see this difference, to focus on returning to what the circumstance is.

So if the circumstance is an epidemiologist named John Smith made this prediction, and your brain then has 100 anxious thoughts about it, even just returning your brain to, okay brain, I hear all those thoughts, all actually we know to be true right now is an epidemiologist named John Smith made this prediction, even if you just redirect your brain to thinking the circumstance, the sentence that describes the circumstance instead of all the rest of your thoughts, you will see that it changes how you feel and that it starts to reduce your anxiety just by anchoring you in what is true and objective and outside of you and an actual circumstance in the world, which is so much more limited and less scary than all of your thoughts.

And you have to do this on purpose because if you just let your brain run the show, your amygdala, your fixation on danger, especially in the context of all of this media constantly, that's what's going to run the show and you're going to constantly feel afraid and anxious and overwhelmed and you're going to spend all day browsing the news or drinking three bottles of wine.

Whatever it is you're going to do to try to deal with those feelings. So you cannot let your unconscious brain, just how it happens to react to whatever it reads, be in charge of what you're going to think. It's like eating trash off

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the street, or letting a toddler pick what you should eat. You'll just end up eating Cheetos.

You can't let your brain be in charge of the show unconsciously. So you have to engage that prefrontal cortex, that part of your brain that can reason, and engage it in looking for what are the actual circumstances, what are the actual facts that I know to be true.

And like I said, making sure, if an epidemiologist says this may happen, that doesn't mean the circumstance is now this will happen. It means the circumstance is that epidemiologist with that name said this might happen. If you practice this, you will see that that starts to feel so different in your body and it's going to start to reduce that anxiety and that fixation.

And then the other thing that I really recommend you do is that you limit the amount of news and social media that you consume. I know nobody wants to do this, and I think part of the problem is that most of us were reading the news and on social media too much anyway, before this. So we were already checking Facebook first thing in the morning and already looking at the news when we were bored or didn't want to work.

And so we already had that habit, and now it's been hijacked by this threat vigilant system that your brain already has, and by this constant influx of news that's designed to stimulate it. So I know it feels hard, it almost can feel like something you're low-level compulsive about, and I also think that in this time of social distancing, a lot of us are doing that to kind of feel connected, to feel community.

While everybody's online freaking out so I want to go online and be with them freaking out. But you just have to think of it as taking a drug that's going to weaken your immune system. That's really what it's like. I'm not saying don't be informed. I'm not saying don't check the news a couple of

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times a day to read if there's any updates that you really need to know about.

But every time you start that mindless scrolling or start checking all the time or read the news every time, you're just feeding more and more frenzy to that part of your brain that is designed to fixate on it and so it's just going to get more and more intense. It's like feeding a drug and it's just going to make you more and more anxious.

So I really recommend setting some times that you - if you're right now on your phone looking at it all the time, then just start with setting a few times that you will put your phone down and do something else. Call a friend, text a friend even, speak to someone if there's someone in your household, pet an animal, take a bath, do something else because keeping that part of your brain engaged constantly is going to be exhausting and very wearing on your mental and your physical health.

Alright, that's that for our first instalment and I'll see you guys back here in a couple of days. I'm going to talk about how to shift into neutral thoughts. Oh, before I forget, if you want more of this work, I'm doing a free webinar. It's on Thursday, March 26th and it's at 6pm Eastern. If you sign up, we will send out a replay if you can't watch it live so don't worry about that.

You just go to unfuckyourbrain.com/sanity. It's How to Stay Sane in Any Crisis is the topic of the webinar and I'm going to teach you three tools and concepts that you need to know in order to get yourself centered, get focused, and get creative and productive during this time, which all of us need to do because for all the reasons we just discussed, just reading the news constantly is not a good idea.

So it's unfuckyourbrain.com/sanity. You can sign up. Again, totally free. Just one of the things that I want to offer to all of you during this time of runaway brains. It's unfuckyourbrain.com/sanity. Or you can text your email

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address to 1-347-997-1784. And when you get the prompt for the codeword, just text back sanity.

That's +1-347-997-1784. And when you get asked for the code, you just text back sanity and we will send you the link to sign up right to your phone. I'll see you there.

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 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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