

Neutralize Your Negative Thoughts (Turn Panic Into Peace Series #2)



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 new listeners and existing chickens. I hope you all are surviving your own brains today and we are going to talk about how to make that even easier on the episode today.

So in the first episode of this bonus series, Turning Panic Into Peace, I talked about how the current situation and especially the news media and social media is really kind of grabbing the wheel from your brain and activating this very primitive danger-focused part of your brain.

And if you think about it statistically, so many more people right now are being impacted by the fear of coronavirus and their thoughts about coronavirus than are actually being impacted by the virus. Now, that's not to say that it's not important that we deal with the people being impacted by the virus, and it's not to say that we shouldn't make plans and take precautions and practice social distancing like all the experts recommend.

It doesn't mean we don't take it seriously as a public health issue. But what I talked about at length in that first episode, which you should go listen to if you haven't is the way in which our kind of vision and thought process gets distorted and almost hijacked because we're being told all of this constant information about something that we are told is this big threat to our lives, and because of the way our brain works.

So in that episode, I also talked about how to engage your prefrontal cortex to differentiate between what's actually happening and your thought about

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what's happening as the first step to getting a little bit of perspective on what is going on in your brain.

I really remember when I first learned that my thoughts were not just an objective representation of reality, that just blew my mind. Like most of us, I just assumed, "Well, if I think it, it must be because it's true." And sure, sometimes it would turn out I was mistaken, but I mostly just believed everything I thought and as though my brain was just objectively evaluating the world, and as if I had no control over it.

So like most of us, I would constantly try to control everything around me in order to be able to think or feel something different. You see that happening so much with the response to the virus as well. People trying to control their loved ones, people trying to control strangers on the internet, people trying to control strangers in public.

And I'm not talking about public health officials making recommendations. I'm talking about individual people getting consumed with negative emotion and with trying to force their parents to take it more seriously or force their friends to take it more seriously or just trying to control everything and everyone around them so they can feel safer.

And I've experienced this as well, and I think people who have online presences or online businesses right now are getting a lot of this as well. Some people telling me that I should be spreading my work more and offering more to help people, and some people telling me that it's unseemly for me to be talking about x, y, or z.

So much compassion for all of that. We all think that in order to feel better, we need other people to change their actions, we need reality to change, we need to change things outside of ourselves. And what I want to teach you today is a tool that's going to help you see that that's not true.

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One of the eternal truths of being a human is that we are constantly trying to control everything outside of ourselves, which we really can't control, and we don't spend nearly enough time controlling what we can control, which is our own thought process, our own way of thinking about the world.

Now, we can't control what thoughts unconsciously come up, but once they're there and we get awareness of them, we can decide whether we want to keep practicing them. When you think a thought over and over again, you're just practicing it to make it stronger. Or, whether we want to think something else.

And that is truly the difference that changes your life is the ability to think something instead of what your brain unconsciously offers you. It's like your brain brings you a dead mouse that it killed for you in the yard, like it was a cat. It's like, here's a terrible thought for you.

And we grow up just thinking we have to be like, okay, I guess now this is mine, I guess I have to carry this around in my mouth now. We don't. We actually can choose what to think instead. So I want to introduce you all to the concept of neutral thoughts.

Now, if you are a long-time listener of the podcast, this will be a great review for you. And if you are new, this is going to blow your mind. So when we start to pay attention to our thoughts versus our circumstances, the facts of the world versus what we think about them, which we talked about in the first episode, we start to become aware that we have a lot of negative thoughts.

And in the current circumstances particularly, we have a lot of catastrophizing thoughts. Everything is going to be terrible, we're all going to die, I'm going to get sick, my family's going to get sick, I'm never going to

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see my loved ones again, the world is going to end, the economy is going to crash, all of those thoughts people are having.

And if you have heard that you can change your thoughts, you probably are trying to change them to super positive thoughts. That's what happens a lot is that we try to counter anxiety with kind of Pollyanna thinking. So we try to go from everything's terrible and we're all going to die and everything is horrible, to everything is going to be fine, there's nothing to worry about.

It's too big of a jump. If you were able to already believe that positive of a thought, you wouldn't be having all of these negative emotions. This is where I think positive thinking and mindset work sometimes get a bad rap because people don't understand that there is actually a skill and an appropriate way to build that skill, and that going straight from a horribly negative thought to an amazingly positive thought doesn't work for most people, especially if you haven't built the skill of managing your mind and thinking on purpose.

So I can now sometimes go from like, a really painful, horrible feeling thought, to an amazing feeling thought very quickly. But I have built up that skill. It's like if you trained as a classical chef for 20 years, then yeah, you can probably make a soufflé in your sleep. But if you've never done anything in the kitchen, try and make a soufflé the first time is not a good idea.

So what you want to do instead is learn to come up with and practice what I call neutral thoughts. So on the first episode in this little bonus series, I talked about the idea that facts are objective and neutral and we have interpretation of them. When I say a neutral thought, I mean something a little bit different. I mean that it's in between a negative and a positive thought.

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So it's kind of neutral. You can also sometimes call it a little bit positive, or sometimes it's just a thought that's like, a little bit less negative. Like, your original thought is a -10 and your new thought is going to be a -8. So I call it a neutral thought. It doesn't mean that there is any mathematical equation between them or that it's purely neutral.

It just means it's a step between where you are and where you would like to be in your thinking. So let me give you an example. Let's say your thought is, "I'm going to get the virus, I'm going to get really sick and then I'm going to die and my children will be left parentless or with only one parent and then everything will be horrible and they'll be traumatized forever and everything will end."

Those are your current thoughts. Trying to go to, "Everything is going to be amazing and wonderful and nothing bad could ever happen," that's way too positive. A neutral thought might be something that's kind of much more factual like, "The majority of people who get this virus survive. The vast majority of people who get this virus survive."

It's true for any age group, even the most at-risk age group, a large majority of people survive. Or, "Many people are just not going to get the virus at all. Or it's entirely possible that my family is going to get through this just fine. Many families are."

These are just different versions, but you can see the difference. We're not going to, "I'm sure that everything will be perfect. No one I know will ever be harmed. I'll never experience any loss and life will just be perfect and amazing." It's untrue and it's not helpful.

But you're not just rolling around in the negative thought. You are bringing that negative thought up a little bit. You're acknowledging it's entirely possible that none of that is going to happen. You're acknowledging the

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reality. Most people who got the COVID-19 virus are just fine. And many people are never going to get it.

So you're coming up with a neutral thought. Now, this technique obviously works for anything in life. When I have taught it before, there's an episode in the main podcast called The Thought Ladder, which teaches a similar concept and there's an episode called How to Think New Thoughts. I teach it more at length. It works for anything.

I often use body image as an example and actually, let me give you that example because if you're really deep in your kind of COVID insanity right now, it may be hard for you to access the concept. So in body image, the example I always give is if your thought is, "My stomach is disgusting," you are not ready to believe something like, "My stomach is beautiful and my body is gorgeous."

Too far. You don't believe it. But you can believe something very neutral and more factual like, "This is a human stomach. I have a human stomach. Many stomachs in the world look like this." Those are neutral thoughts. They are not horribly negative, they're not amazingly positive. They're often factual or they often kind of bring in the rest of the world almost as an other people may experience this.

Sometimes it's easier for our brain to believe something what is true, which is like, many people are going to contract the virus and be just fine. It's easier for our brain than believing if we made it an I-statement, like I might get it and be just fine. Sometimes it's a lot easier to think about other people, like lots of people have a stomach that looks like this.

There's a bunch of different techniques that you can use, but you're generally just trying to acknowledge that there's some potential that your negative thought is wrong or a thought that acknowledges the potential of a

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positive outcome, or a thought that really brings you back to just the circumstances, like this is a stomach, this many people have a virus, as opposed to all of your negative catastrophizing.

Or a thought that sort of introduces a maybe or a possibly. You can play around with it. There is no special rule for exactly how to do it. It's a creative process. You have to brainstorm. But you can also listen to the episode on how to think new thoughts and the thought ladder on the main podcast feed, which you can find just by scrolling through by title or by Googling it for more details, but that's the basic idea.

If you see what your negative thought is, you can see what the actual circumstance is, and then you find something that you can think that's a little more positive or just a little bit less negative. So the one important thing to understand when you're doing this is it needs to be a thought that you believe.

Now, most of us are confused about what it means to believe something. You don't judge whether you believe something by thinking the thought and then waiting to see if your brain has any objections. And like, if it's silent for 20 minutes then you believe it. That's not how it works.

Your brain is like a hostile cross-examining lawyer. It can always find an objection. The way you know if you believe a thought is you think your horrible thought that feels terrible, you feel what that feels like, which is terrible. Then you think the new thought and you pay attention to whether your body feels any different.

Does it feel a little bit lighter? It might not feel amazing yet. Do you feel a tiny bit of relief? If you feel any change in your body, that means you believe the new thought. Your emotions are physical sensations in your body. And in the next two episodes of this series, I'm going to talk a lot

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about emotions, how to allow and ground in your emotions, how to kind of experience them without them being so debilitating and so upsetting.

But I really wanted you all to have this kind of thought hack first so that you can start to get a little bit of relief and start to calm yourself down a little bit and have something proactive to practice doing. So that's how you tell if you believe a thought. You have to check in with your body. And again, we might just be going from like, 100 on the anxiety scale to 90 on the anxiety scale.

We're not necessarily going for feeling even calm. Any little bit will help. And then the last thing you have to know is that once you've found that thought, and again, there's no right or wrong one. You just brainstorm a bunch of thoughts and see which ones feel different in your body. Once you've picked one that you want to practice thinking, your job is to practice it.

It is not like a magic spell where you say the thought once, then you never have the rest of your thoughts. Your brain's neurons are used to firing together and then they wire together. You might have heard that. The neurons that fire together wire together.

It just means that your brain has a habit basically. It's got almost muscle memory of thinking a certain thought over and over again. And so when you want to think something new, that old wire, it's like a road in your brain. If we build a new road on the ground, the old road doesn't disappear immediately. If everybody keeps driving down the new road, then eventually, the old road gets grown over and falls into disrepair and people forget about it.

But it's only because everybody went to the new road. So your job is to think that new thought over and over again every time your brain goes

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haywire, but even just preemptively as much as you can. You have to create that new neural pattern. You have to get the new neurons to fire together and wire together to promote that new thought.

The good news is if you practice it, it will eventually become the default thought. So your brain is able to basically learn how to do something consciously and then turn it over to unconscious functioning. So if you think about when you drive somewhere new, the first however many times, some people it's five times, some people it's 50, you have to really follow the direction and think about where you're going.

But eventually, if you drive that route enough, you can do it totally unconsciously. We've all experienced that. We can drive somewhere we know very well while having a conversation about something else, listening to a podcast, we're not even paying attention.

That's how sometimes people end up driving to their old house if they're not paying attention because their brain just took over. It moved into unconscious functioning and it just happened. So that's what can happen with your new thoughts. If you practice a new thought enough consciously, eventually your brain goes, "Oh, I got this, I know how to do this. This is like a habit now that I can actually make unconscious. I'll just think this all the time." And then you won't even have to think it consciously anymore.

But you do have to practice until that happens. So what I want you to do is pick a thought that is really stressing you out about the current environment, or anything else in your life. Come up with a neutral thought. Do not let your brain say I don't know. That is poison. That is like, the lazy part of the brain that will say, "I don't know, I can't do it, it's too hard, let's just think this old thought that feels terrible more."

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Your brain likes to be efficient. It wants to save energy, and it wants to be right. So it would just rather think this old thought, even though it feels terrible. Your brain doesn't care that it feels terrible to you. It's not interested.

So the most important thing is not to take I don't know for an answer. Come up with a neutral thought, re-listen to this podcast if you need to, listen to the episode on how to think new thoughts and the thought ladder. Brainstorm at least two thoughts you could practice. Think them, try them on for size, see how they feel in your body, and then practice them.

And I promise, if you do that consistently, it will start to change how you feel about the current situation, about the pandemic, and about anything else in your life. Alright, and if you found this helpful, please share it with a friend. I'm doing this bonus series because I think so many people are experiencing so much unnecessary mental suffering during this complicated, challenging time.

Our circumstances are changing, but we're not all losing our minds because of the circumstance. The circumstance does not mean that we have to feel this way, that we have to feel anxious and stressed out and afraid constantly.

So the whole reason for this whole bonus series is to make this work accessible to people who haven't really heard of it before or maybe haven't felt like they needed that kind of support before. So if you know someone who you think would benefit from it, especially if you're a regular listener, I really encourage you to share it. That's what it's for. I want to help as many of you as possible get better at managing your minds through this crisis. I'll talk to you soon.

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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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