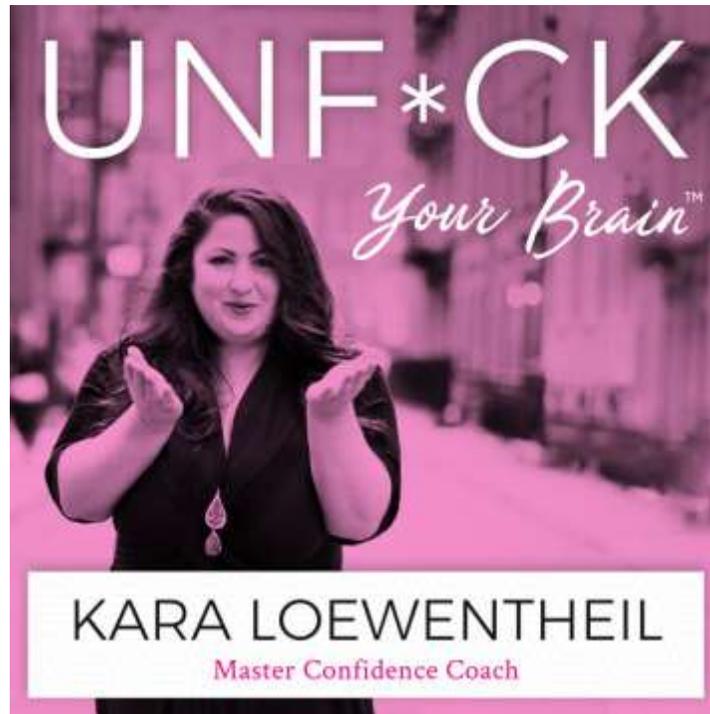


UFYB 137: Defensiveness & Shame



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB 137: Defensiveness & 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. It has been quite a week, hasn't it? I think a lot of us are having a lot of intense emotions the last couple weeks, but this to me is why we have thought work. Life is not always supposed to be convenient and easy and comfortable for us. And for those of us for whom it usually is those things, at least materially speaking, I think we're being called on to pay closer attention.

So one of the things that naturally comes up as we start to broaden our awareness is that we may start to feel defensive. And this is something that happens in any area of our lives where we gain new awareness of something. And so today I really want to talk about defensiveness, and I'm going to use my own mind and my own thoughts about how I'm showing up as a coach and a business owner right now as an example.

But I am going to distill for you the lesson that I think applies to any place that you're feeling defensive in your life. So the place that I have been feeling defensive recently has been around some of the conversations around racial justice and making coaching businesses more equitable and inclusive.

And so I'm going to use myself as the example for that defensiveness to talk about it because that is what I always do on this podcast is tell you what I have learned from my own brain. But if you're listening to this episode three years later because you're defensive about work feedback, it still applies.

As always, I give examples, but what I'm teaching applies to any time you're having this emotion or phenomenon. So I'm first going to tell you

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what I saw happening in my brain and then what I realized about defensiveness that I'm going to teach you.

So as you know, if you've been listening, I have been creating a lot of content and teaching and doing extra coaching calls and just trying to show up to the best of my ability during this time for all of you and especially for my black students and clients. And I've gotten the usual and expected mix of responses.

Some people are happy with what I'm doing, some people hate what I'm doing, and all different versions of responses. Some people saying thank you, some people saying fuck you, literally. Some people are upset I'm talking about this at all, some people are upset that I'm telling them that if they are white they have internalized racist thoughts. And of course, anybody who lives under racism internalizes racist thoughts.

And then some people are upset that I'm talking about white people's feelings, all of that. I'm fine with all that feedback. I did not spend two decades working in social justice movements to be surprised that no matter what you do in a given movement or cause, some people will hate it and that's totally fine.

Some people hate this podcast because I curse. People have all kinds of thoughts. I do think starting my work out in the world as an abortion rights advocate really toughened up my skin to people hating what I'm doing. But during this whole time, while I've been trying to show up authentically and trying to be in alignment with my values, I have also been feeling very anxious and defensive about being called out.

And at first that was sort of diffuse, but as I teach you, I dug in, I leaned into that feeling to see what was I really feeling anxious or defensive about. And here's what I realized. I have no fear or defensiveness about being called out for, let's say one of the things I just mentioned, talking about white

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people's feelings in thought work, or trying to teach anti-racism in this context, even though I'm a white woman.

There are totally valid critiques that people have about why I shouldn't do those things, and by valid I mean - well first of all, everybody gets to have their own thoughts and feelings no matter what. Never my place to tell you what to feel or think.

And there are also not illogical critiques. I totally understand the models that give rise to those critiques and the thoughts, and I respect that totally. And I also have deliberated and thought deeply about it and I feel very in alignment and in integrity to show up and be teaching this way.

There are people who believe both things, that white people should talk to especially other white people about racism and anti-racism, and then white people shouldn't be talking about this stuff and shouldn't be teaching it themselves. Those two things are incompatible and I know my reasons for what I've chosen and I feel strong in that.

Similar example - I'm giving you some examples of things I'm not defensive about so we can do the contrast and compare. And this is useful for you if you are doing work on defensiveness for yourself in any area, like coming up with examples of things where people could disagree with you or be mad at you and you wouldn't care because you feel strong in your own opinion about it.

So similar example, I had an email exchange with a listener who wrote in that it was unconvincing that I was pretending to care about social justice now and I should stick to teaching people how to make money. And that email did not upset me at all because my response was just, listen, I can and should have been talking more about racial justice for sure, and you may not like how I'm doing this or think it's not enough.

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But saying that I only just started pretending to care about social justice is so counterfactual to my entire career. I was a social justice activist, advocate, policy person, litigator, academic, personally was on boards of directors, volunteer organizations. Personally and professionally is what my life has been about. And so it's just, I had no defensiveness about that because I was like, that's just inaccurate.

I've always cared about this stuff and talked about it and I don't talk about making money that much. This is not a making money podcast. I mean, I talk about it. It's one of the topics I cover, but I certainly talk about sexism more than I talk about making money on this podcast.

So the point is, no defensiveness because I do believe that I could and should have done more to talk about racial justice and I'm not shaming myself about that. I've accepted that and I'm working on remedying it. So we were in agreement about that.

And then we were in disagreement about my commitment to social justice, but both of those things I felt very strong in my opinion, my position, and having my own back. So no defensiveness. Now, where did I have anxiety and defensiveness about being called out?

It was around places that I already believed I should have been doing better and I hadn't been doing better. You can't see, but this is written in all caps in my notes. It was the places in my work and in my business in specific, that I already kind of believed I was not really in alignment with my values and I was not doing what I could or not doing everything I could.

And this was all unconscious, but those thoughts were back there unconsciously. And that those are places there I already believed unconsciously, I would say almost semi-consciously because you know I'm going to talk more about later when you have shame about something, you kind of only look at it half out of the corner of your eye.

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So it's like, you're half conscious of the thought. So it was around places that I already believed I should have been doing better and I hadn't. So for me, that comes down to things like not having enough diversity and inclusion in my team. So I have several women of color among the independent contractors that I work with, but of my three full-time employees, which is myself and two other women, we're all white women.

Not having enough diversity and inclusion in my Clutch coaches. In the past, I have had women of color as Clutch coaches. Right now, I have two Clutch coaches who are both queer women, but they're both white women. Not having worked through whether and how to make my business more inclusive in terms of the financial.

So I did switch from a small high-end group to a larger membership group that is more accessible and more affordable and more inclusive in that way, but there's still more work to do and there's a lot of complicated questions around race and class and socioeconomic variables and how to integrate those that I haven't fully worked through.

Having talked a lot about feminism in my teaching and having talked about racial justice sometimes, but not as often as I could because I was being motivated by my fear about judgment for doing it wrong and my "confusion," which I'm making air quotes around. It's like, it was the emotion I was feeling but that's not a good excuse.

"Confusion" that I was creating for myself about whether it was okay for me to try to teach black women and women of color how to use these tools to think about racism. So those were all the areas in which I was feeling anxious and defensive, and these were all kind of half-conscious and coed thoughts I had that I hadn't looked at directly because I was creating shame for myself.

And for me, now that I'm looking at these thoughts and can see them, I see there's a lot of black and white all or nothing thinking. Like, well, if I'm not

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willing to run my business entirely on a self-chosen sliding scale, then I can't make it more financially equitable, which is obviously some stupid bullshit, but a lot of our thoughts are stupid bullshit and we're not aware of them.

So most of these were these thoughts that I didn't quite have consciously until I dug into them, but that anxiety and defensiveness that I was feeling was the trigger that showed me that there was something going on in my brain that I needed to uncover.

And so in this way, that anxiety and defensiveness were actually really important signals for me to lean in, which is what I always teach about triggers, right? If something feels triggering, get curious. Why? What am I going to learn?

When we are feeling defensive, we think it's because other people are so wrong about us. Whenever I coach someone who's defensive, either I'm coaching them about their defensiveness about somebody else being wrong about them, or if they're defensive to the coaching, it's because they think I'm wrong about them.

But actually, we feel defensive when we believe that other people are right about us. So let me say that again. When we feel defensive, we think it's because other people are wrong about us and unfair. But actually, it's because we fear they are right and being fair in their assessment.

So again, if somebody "called me out" for not talking enough about feminism, I would not feel defensive. I would just laugh at that. That would be so ludicrous to me. You could totally disagree with how I approach feminism, but if somebody was like, "You just don't talk about this," that would just be so off-base I wouldn't feel defensive.

But if someone calls me out or in for not talking enough about racial justice, now, that's a place that, let's say a month ago, before I started doing more

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work on this in my own mind, I might feel defensive because I would have had the thought that they were right.

Now I've worked through my thoughts about how I didn't talk about it enough before, and I completely agree with that. And so I don't feel defensive about it anymore because I'm not shaming myself about it and my thought now is, "You're 100% right, I fucked that up, I'm trying to do better going forward, which is what a human can do."

So if we think someone is right about us, if we're defensive because we secretly worry that someone is right, why do we feel defensive instead of just agreeing? So in that example I just gave, now if somebody says, "Listen, you didn't talk about this enough before in your work," I don't feel defensive. I'm like, 100%, I agree, I have said that myself, I'm working on being better at it.

Or if someone says, "You have curly hair," I'm like, yes, agree. I don't feel defensive. Why? Because we only feel defensive when we have shame. We don't feel defensive if we think someone is right about us and we agree and it's fine. Not necessarily it's fine like we're not going to change it, but just like, it's neutral emotionally. Not like, oh yeah, you're totally right about that, I want to change that about myself.

If we feel that, we don't feel defensive. That's our thought process. We feel defensive when we have shame. So if someone points out that I need more diversity and inclusion in my hiring, and I agree with them, we're in agreement, why would I feel negative about that? It's because I'm shaming myself about whatever's being pointed out.

So under defensiveness is always shame. When you make yourself wrong or bad or unacceptable as a person for something you've thought or done, you feel shame. And shame feels terrible, so you want to avoid it at all costs. And that means you avoid thinking about whatever you're feeling shame about.

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That's why my thoughts that I described earlier were kind of unconscious or at most half-conscious. I wasn't looking directly at them because I was creating that shame. So then if someone else happens to spot or mention this thing that you feel shame about, you will lash out in defensiveness because you're basically defending a painful spot in your psyche.

It's like if an animal - if you've ever had a pet who has a hurt body part and you try to touch it, they may growl or bite or swipe at you, even if they normally wouldn't, because they're trying to defend that painful spot. Even though you may be accurately identifying that something's wrong and you're trying to help fix it.

So what is so, I think, problematically seductive about defensiveness is that when we don't really know what it's like to truly have our own back, defensiveness can feel like you're standing up for yourself. But you're not because really standing up for yourself and having your own back has nothing to do with what you say to other people or trying to point out problems that other people have too if they point out a problem you have. That's not having your own back.

Having your own back means never making yourself feel that you are unworthy as a human. So when you are creating shame and avoiding looking at it, you're missing out on so much learning. When you work through and remove the shame, then you can actually look at what's being pointed out and see if you agree with it or not.

So in my example, when I finally clued myself in that I was feeling defensive, and just I kind of want to specify and note like, you can do this work without anyone having even pointed it out to you. I actually did not get complaints about these things really yet, but I could just tell in my mind that I was being anxious, I would, and that I was feeling defensive preemptively.

So defensiveness can happen, of course, just in your own mind, without anyone else saying anything. If you are imagining that they might say

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something, it's because you already believe that. You already have those thoughts.

So when I kind of clued myself in and saw like, "Oh, why am I so weird about this? Why do I have all this anxiety and defensiveness right now about things that no one has even said to me yet really?" When I saw there was shame there, I asked myself, if I knew I was allowed to love myself 100% no matter what, what would I want to think and feel and do about this tender area? What would I want to think and feel and do about this topic or these thoughts that I'm having this shame and defensiveness about?

And that allowed me to see that I actually was out of alignment with my beliefs and values and I wanted to change that. Once I removed the shame, it was so easy to see. It's like that curtain lifts and you're like, "Oh, why was I making such a big deal about this in my brain with all that shame?"

This is just something that I now see and I want to do better, and so I just will take action to solve it. This, y'all, is why - if you are in The Clutch and you have heard me coach you a million times about how you have to get the thought and feeling lined up and then the action becomes so clear, when there's all that shame confusing things, you can't figure out what to do or it seems impossible or it seems too hard or you don't even know that you need to do something. It's all a mess.

As soon as I remove that shame, then my model is so clear and I was just like, oh, it was my shame causing me not to address these things because I wasn't even totally conscious of my thoughts about them because that shame was like that electric fence keeping me out of that area of my brain.

Now that I'm in there and I see, oh, I haven't fully lived up to my values in these ways, okay, now I just need to fix that. I just need to have a plan for prioritizing diversity and inclusion in my hiring. I just need to have a plan

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and hire a coach and work through how I want to structure my business financially around these values.

Now actions are totally clear because when your thought and feeling is aligned, the actions become clear. There's so much resistance created with defensiveness and it's so pointless. Because if you truly like your choices and your reasons for them, then there isn't a need to be defensive. You're only defensive in proportion to the extent that you don't have your own back about your thoughts and feelings and actions.

But having your own back does not mean rigidly insisting that you are right no matter what. That's not having your own back because that prevents you from ever being able to grow and evolve, and not being able to grow and evolve is not a way of supporting and loving yourself.

Having your own back means loving yourself enough to be willing to entertain other people's point of view and truly decide for yourself what you want to accept or leave that they offer you. But you have to ask that question from if I 100% loved myself and knew I was worthy, and I knew I couldn't control their thoughts about me but I had my own back and I knew it was okay if I had made a mistake or done something wrong or wanted to change something about myself or about my actions, if that's the place I was in where this was morally neutral feedback and I loved myself and I was open to really thinking about whether or not I want to change something, then what would I think about this feedback?

Any time you're feeling defensive, it's because underneath it, there's shame. You are believing that if someone says to you is true, that means you're wrong and bad and unworthy. Either for the reason they suggest or some other reason. But it's not in their eyes. It's in your eyes.

I have been doing a lot of behind the scenes coaching and talking with many other coaches the last couple of weeks who are new to thinking about racial justice in these ways, and what I keep coming back to is the

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idea that all we can do is, number one, get clear on our values without defensiveness, without guilt, without shame, and two, try to show up in integrity with them, knowing that we won't always do it perfectly, but that we will have our own back.

We will not make ourselves unworthy. We will not indulge in and create shame if it is pointed out to us or we point out to ourselves that we are not doing what is in alignment with our values. Then we will work through those thoughts and work through that shame and defensiveness so that we can decide if we want to change something and how.

Thought work is what lets you do all of that. Coaching is about clarifying who you are, what you believe in, what you want to do. Knowing your reasons and liking them, and then having your own back no matter what. And that doesn't mean always believing you're right. It means radical love and acceptance for yourself, which is what allows you to consider where you've been wrong.

And when you can do that without shaming yourself, that's when you can actually change. So if you are feeling defensive about the conversation around racial justice and inequality in this country or anything else, I want you to dig into that feeling. Look at the thoughts. See where you have shame or defensiveness and then work through those layers.

Accept the premise that this other person is right or that your own critical thoughts about yourself are right. What if they're right? What are you making that mean? If you're defensive, it's because you are believing that they are right and you're creating shame around that.

When you release that defensiveness and shame, if you know you have your own back, then you get to decide. You can hear the thoughts from someone else or from your own mind about what you could or should be doing differently, and you can truly evaluate them and decide what you want to do. That's what having your own back is.

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It's not rigid. It's the opposite. It's being completely flexible, able to hear anything, able to sift through and discern what to take and leave without any drama about yourself or anyone else. Alright my chickens, some of the best work you can do. Get to it. Talk to you soon.

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

Learning how to manage your mind, to 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 347-934-8861. 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 want it to.