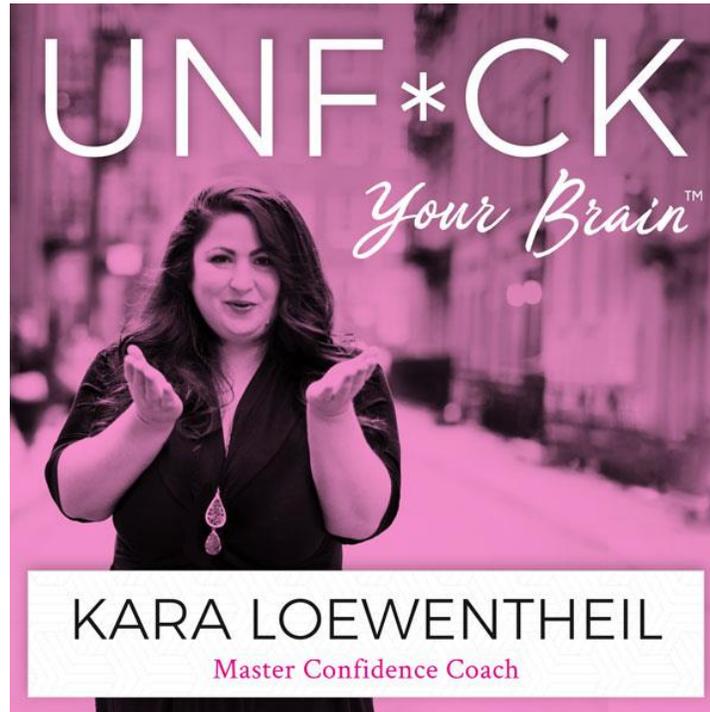


UFYB 142: Are You Underacting or Overacting?



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 chickens. How are you? Are you making your way in this brave new world? I think it's so fascinating to watch our thoughts and how we react and think about different circumstances, and how quickly our thinking can change.

And I think this pandemic is a perfect example. I've been thinking about this a lot because sometimes I have clients who will complain that it's so hard or it takes so long to think in a new way. And of course, that's the result they create for themselves is that, number one, it takes way longer because they're busy using their brain to think about how it takes so long.

And then, however long it does take, they decide that was way too long. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. But I think it's so interesting because look at all the ways that you think now in the pandemic that you didn't before and how effortless it was for you to learn how to think that way.

So today, I was thinking about this because I had to get - I didn't have to, I chose to get in a stranger's car for a short period of time. So not like a random stranger, there was a reason. I'll explain it. So, this is something I used to do all the time and sometimes multiple times a day.

I would take taxis, or I would take ride service apps. I would use ride service apps in New York City or when I was traveling all over the world. I would just get in a stranger's car and not really think anything of it. And then today, I chose to spend five minutes in a stranger's car because I was returning a rental car and buying a new car from a dealership, and they were a five-minute drive apart.

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And it wasn't really walkable. It was like a half hour walk and it was over an overpass. So I chose to do it, but I definitely thought about the choice, like, was that worth it. And then once I decided to do it, I really quickly thought through what would make it safest.

So I would wear a mask, the driver would wear a mask, I would sit in the backseat farthest away from the driver, I would open both windows in the backseat so there was a lot of airflow. I would have someone from the dealership pick me up rather than call a car service.

So I had this very quick calculus of given all the things that I believe about current safety in COVID, what would I do? So this is literally something I never thought about before two months ago, at most, ever. But now thinking this thought comes completely naturally. It's not hard.

I'm not saying that there aren't thoughts I have that cause anxiety. But I don't say to myself, "Oh, it's so hard to think this thought about how to make this car ride safe." That thought just comes naturally. And we didn't even know that this existed two months ago, and yet all of our thinking is so changed now based on these new circumstances.

And again, some of those thoughts may be negative, there might be anxiety and fear and all that, that's not really what I'm talking about. I'm just talking about all the things you now believe, remember, and use when you process and analyze situations that you never thought about before.

But your brain very quickly has learned a whole new way of thinking. I never thought before about sanitation. I was, let's say, lucky, to not have to think about it. I was not immune-compromised. People who are immune-compromised used to think about this stuff anyway. But I didn't have to.

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And now I think about it very easily and naturally. My brain very quickly learned how to think a whole new set of thoughts, how to analyze with them and make decisions with them and internalize them, and you don't hear anyone being like, "It's just so hard to remember that I need to wash my hands."

We very quickly changed our thought process. So I kind of want you all to think about this the next time you're telling yourself that it's so hard or it takes so much work to change your thought patterns. You are totally capable of changing the way you think about things very quickly when you're motivated to do so.

In the case of COVID, you believe that you can change your thoughts and that it's beneficial to do so, so you do. If you believed that it was as vital and as beneficial to change your thought patterns about other areas of your life, you'd be surprised how quickly you can shift them.

Your brain is more powerful than you think. Just look how quickly it got used to a global pandemic. It can get used to believing something positive you want to believe that quickly as well if you think about it as much as you're thinking about the pandemic.

If you had to estimate how much time you spend thinking about COVID or any other kind of catastrophizing in your life, how often would that be? It's really fascinating to do the math. And what fraction of the time you spend worrying about things you can't control are you spending thinking the thoughts you want to believe on purpose?

I think for most of us who aren't managing our minds, it's a tiny fraction. We spend way more time letting our brains run wild than we do consciously directing them. You need to be focusing your brain on believing on purpose the things you want to believe, as least as much as you let it run wild.

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And then eventually over time with practice, your brain is mostly believing what you want and only occasionally running wild. You have to shift that proportion. So that is my tough love pep talk for today.

So here's what's interesting and it's going to lead into today's topic. Those of you who are already practicing your thoughts a lot probably heard that and you're thinking, "I really should practice more. I don't practice enough." And those of you who heard that and thought, "I'm already working so hard and it's just so challenging," you're probably not practicing your thoughts enough.

Because this is a fascinating paradox that I have discovered through coaching thousands of women and it's what I'm going to teach about on the podcast today. And that is that there tends to be very roughly, two different groups of people. Now, as I'm going to talk about later, it's not really groups of people because people can be in different groups for different areas of their lives.

So we could just say two different ways of approaching the world or a certain area of your life, and that is there are people who think that they're never doing enough. People who think they're never doing enough, and those people actually tend to be doing quite a lot.

And then there are people who think that they work so hard and they just need to take it easy and it's such an uphill battle for them and the world is unfair, they're just not getting what they want, and those people tend to not actually be working that hard or taking that much action.

And I call this overacting versus underacting, or overactors versus underactors. So here's some signs that you're an overactor, and then I'll tell you some signs that you're an underactor. It's obviously not a kind of calculation. It's not a math problem you can do. It's just a pattern that I see

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and I'm going to kind of give you some guidelines for identifying which one of these you are.

And I'll talk about this more later, some of you may be one of these ways in all areas of your life pretty much, and some of you may be one of these in one area of your life, or in another area of your life you're the other one. And sometimes even in the same area of your life, say your work, there might be certain elements of your work where you're one way versus another way.

But usually, it's one or the other in a given area or subarea or for some of you, your whole approach to life. So here's some kind of clues that you're probably an overactor. If other people think that you're doing a lot and tell you that. If you are able to create the results you set out to create, so you are able to set goals and achieve them, but then you usually immediately decide that it doesn't count or it isn't that impressive, and you immediately start moving onto the next goal.

You probably tend to have thoughts like, "I'm lazy, I don't work that hard, I'm too easy on myself, I let myself off the hook too much, I need to do better, I need to do more, I could have been better prepared, I could have done better work." Those are the kinds of thoughts that overactors tend to think.

You're an underactor overall or in certain areas of your life if you never get your projects or goals off the ground. So you do a little and stop, or you never start at all. You don't create the results you set out to create consistently, you feel like you have unique challenges to overcome and that things are particularly hard for you.

You've been working on some of your goals for months or years without making any progress. You find yourself making excuses for your lack of

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progress. You're more likely to blame other people or things outside of you. You beat yourself up for never finishing what you start or not doing what you say you will.

You probably tend to think thoughts like, "This is just really hard, I'm working so hard, it's harder for me than other people, I just have a lot going on right now, I just need to know, learn, study this more and then I'll be ready."

So, here's what's so interesting. What I have found is that everyone mostly thinks that they have the opposite problem than they actually have. So, people who are overactors and who are taking a lot of action, potentially even too much action usually think that they don't do enough and that they need to work harder.

And people who don't make progress on their goals and aren't taking enough action usually think that they are overworking themselves, that they're working so hard, they're trying so much, and it just won't happen for some reason, and that they need to take a break.

So I often get questions from my clients like, "Well, I saw you coach this woman on the Clutch coaching call that she needs to slow down and be nicer to herself, so why did you coach me that I need to stop indulging and get off my butt and do something? Why did you coach me to get moving, to take more action?"

And the answer is because you have different problems, and so you need different medicine. Coaching is not one size fits all. You have to correctly diagnose the problem in order to know what the correct solution is. So if you're an overactor, taking more action is not going to solve your problem.

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You're already taking action and you're getting things done, but it doesn't feel good. You're not getting any emotional satisfaction from that, of course, because you're just accomplishing something and then dismissing it. Your thoughts about it aren't where they need to be.

You actually need to learn to slow down and give yourself credit for what you're accomplishing and learn to be happy with what you have and what you've done and where you are. But then if you're an underactor, you think that you're working so hard, but usually what's happening is either you're not actually working that hard, or you're spinning your wheels with a lot of busy work that doesn't amount to anything.

And you think that you just need to be patient and nicer to yourself, and I'm going to talk more about being nice to yourself in a minute and what that really means, but you sort of think, "Oh, probably I just need to be more patient and acknowledge that I'm juggling so much and I'm handling so much and it's so hard."

And when actually no, you need to get off your butt and take some productive action and stop feeling sorry for yourself. So, it's tricky because it's hard to know which one you are on the inside if you don't have experience spotting this because your brain lies to you about which one you are.

People who don't do anything think that they need to give themselves a break and do less. And people who do a lot think that they need to do more. Because your brain is the one who created you taking a lot of action in the first place, so it thinks more action is the solution, or your brain is the one that created you not doing much in the first place, so it thinks doing even less is the right approach.

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And then to make it even more complicated, like I said earlier, sometimes you can be both. Even about the same goal. So you might have a goal to have a coaching business, and maybe you're overacting when it comes to producing content for your potential clients. You're taking a ton of action and creating a lot of stuff, but then you're underacting about making offers, so you end up with a ton of content for clients who don't exist.

This is why looking at the results you're getting is so key in determining whether you're an overactor or an underactor, or whether you're overacting or underacting in some particular area. If you set goals and achieve them, and then you immediately set new ones and you dismiss the ones you've achieved as not counting for some reason, you're an overactor.

If you set goals and you don't achieve them, and then you make excuses about why or you beat yourself up for not doing it, you're an underactor. Now, I want to be really clear. Neither of these is better than the other. It would be very easy to think that it's better to be an overactor because at least you get the results, but overactors still feel terrible.

They achieve the results and then immediately dismiss them. Underactors just don't achieve them, but the emotional experience is pretty similar. If you achieve a result and then you tell yourself it didn't count and you didn't do anything, it doesn't feel any better than not doing anything.

Both types are self-critical and feel miserable about their goals. Because it's not the circumstance that determines our feelings. You can achieve a goal, so let's say you decide you want to write a book. That's your goal. And you're an overactor and you do it.

So once the book is done, your new circumstance is that you've written a book. But that being your new circumstance, the circumstance being that

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you've achieved this thing doesn't create your feelings. It's your thoughts about it.

So whether you decide to write a book and then you don't write a book, or you decide to write a book and you do write a book, the circumstance of having the book or not having the book is not what causes your feelings. It's your thoughts about your circumstance.

So if you don't write the book and your thought is either beating yourself up for it or thinking about how everybody else conspired to keep you from writing the book and it's so unfair, either way, that feels terrible. But if you write the book and your thought is, "It doesn't really count, I'm not good enough, I only got the book deal because I knew that person," if you're dismissing your whole accomplishment, it doesn't feel any better.

One is not better than the other. It's not that underactors should become overactors. It's under and over, they're both too far in either direction. It's just important to know which one you are because the coaching remedy is different.

Like I said, some people may be - some of us are complete overactors or complete underactors and we're very consistent. We're like that in every area of our lives. But most people are a mix, I think. In some areas of their lives, they're overacting, and then in other areas of their lives, they're underacting.

So you really have to break it down and that's why you always have to look at the results. Are you getting results? You have to be very clear about what that means. Are you achieving the goal you set out to achieve but then immediately discounting it? That's overacting, right?

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Or are you not getting the result at all, you're not creating the thing you set out to create, you're not reaching the goal at all, then you're underacting. That's how you know which pattern you're creating.

So if you're an overactor, the remedy is to stop taking so much action. So, this is actually another good test I think. If me telling you that the answer is for you to stop trying to get something, if that feels terrifying, you're probably an overactor.

Overactors are very, very in a rush. They are hustling to get to a place where they'll feel good about themselves, so if you tell them you're not allowed to work on that goal anymore, they feel horrified and terrified because they think their self-worth is at the end of the goal.

Whereas if you're an underactor and I tell you just don't work on that goal, it doesn't matter, you don't need to do it, you'll feel relief. Because you haven't been doing it anyway and now, I've given you permission not to do it.

So if it feels terrifying to think about giving up on a goal and having permission and a coach telling you that's the right thing to do, if that feels terrifying and you don't like that and you're like, no, I need to get to the goal, I need to take more action and get there, you're probably an overactor.

If that feels like a relief, you're probably an underactor, or again, just on that particular goal you're overacting or underacting. When you're an overactor, you're used to trying to act your way out of your feelings. You're used to trying to achieve your way out of your insecurities and your negative emotions.

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But every time you made a goal, you don't feel magically different, and so you discount the goal, or you move the goal post. You start the process all over again because your thought process was once I publish the book, I'm going to feel good about myself. Then you get there, you don't feel good about yourself, and rather than understand that it's because your thoughts have to change, you're like, "Well, it must be because I didn't really do the goal right."

If the goal had been done right, I would feel good about myself. Since I don't, it must be that the goal doesn't count for some reason. That's what your brain does. Then you just start the process all over again with the next goal.

If you're an underactor, I think you are a lot more likely to buffer your way. Overactors tend to buffer with work and taking action even. They may buffer in other areas too, but an overactor is used to trying to act their way out of their feelings by taking action to move projects forward or succeed.

And an underactor is used to buffering to get away from negative emotion, so you're still taking action to get away from negative emotion, but it's more like numbing out, escaping. So I think underactors are more likely to buffer with Netflix or food or booze or whatever else. Something that takes them away from whatever goal they were trying to work on, whereas overactors are more likely to buffer with work and taking a lot of frenetic action.

Or you know, if it's in relationships, it might be like dating like crazy. Just taking a lot of frenetic action on the goal. So if you're an overactor, the antidote is to slow down and be with yourself. You have to stop taking so much action and actually dig into the thoughts and feelings that you are trying to outrun and that you're trying to run towards.

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You have to make lists of what you've accomplished and really sit with giving yourself credit. You have to revise your self-image as a lazy slacker and start to see the ways in which you actually produce and accomplish a lot. You're hustling to get your own approval by doing more and more and more, but it never works because you never stop to appreciate and be proud of yourself for what you've actually done.

So, you have to slow down. You have to recognize that no amount of goal achieving will ever create the feeling that you want it to. You have to create that feeling with your thoughts on purpose. And when you learn to do that, you will actually achieve so much more with so much less energy because it won't really matter. You won't be chasing your self-esteem.

If you're an underactor, the remedy is different. The similarity is that you also have to work on your self-critical thoughts because being mean to yourself is never helpful, no matter which camp you fall into. But where an overactor needs to slow down, an underactor needs to speed up.

They need to put on the brakes, and you need to hit the gas. Underactors need to stop accepting their own reasons and excuses for why they can't take action or accomplish their goals. Some of you maybe aren't taking any action, some of you take a bunch of action and don't get any results.

And then because you're mean to yourself about it, you think that the answer must be to be nicer to yourself about not getting results and tell yourself it's okay. But these are two separate things, and it's so important to distinguish.

There's never a point to being mean to yourself and criticizing yourself. That is never helpful. But it is not kind to yourself. It is not having your own back to just enable yourself in not going after your dreams and not going

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after your goals and not changing your life and not creating what you want to create in life.

It's not a kindness to yourself to just tell yourself that life is hard and you're dealing with a lot and so it's okay that you don't ever do the things you say you want to do. You have to think of yourself as your own coach. If I coach you that way on why you hadn't reached a goal, if I just agreed with you that your life was hard and you were juggling a lot, it was too hard to start a business or too hard to write a novel or whatever else and you should really just be nicer to yourself and not do it and feel fine about it, that would not be useful coaching. It would actually be harmful coaching.

You have to learn if you're an underactor, how to be 100% kind to yourself and stop believing your own excuses and letting yourself off the hook for not getting shit done. Now, here's what's hilarious. Some of you overactors are listening to this and you're thinking, "Yes, that's me, I'm an underactor."

No. If this sounds like your own thoughts and it sounds correct to you then you're actually an overactor. This isn't for you. But if you feel kind of offended and confronted and upset about what I'm saying about not believing your own bullshit, not believing your own excuses, if you feel kind of hurt or like, I don't understand or empathize, I'm not validating you, if you want to tell me all the reasons it's so hard so that I understand that you're a special snowflake with special problems, you're probably an underactor and this message is for you.

So, you have to make that distinction. So important if you're an underactor. Being kind to yourself is always the answer. Being mean to yourself, criticizing yourself, never helpful. But believing your own bullshit is not being kind to yourself.

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So for an underactor, the question is how can I hold loving space for myself 100%? How can I totally have my own back and not tolerate any self-critical talk or mean thoughts about myself while also not believing any of my own excuses about why things aren't happening or I can't have the life I want?

So I want to say again, because I know my chickens, and each of you are thinking that whichever one you are is the worst one. Neither overacting nor underacting are better or worse than each other. Results are not inherently good. Doing things, creating things, it's not inherently positive.

It's not better to do that than to not do that. Some of you are doing too much of that. You're creating lots of results but not for the right reasons and not in ways that feel good and not in ways that create value for your life. So it has nothing to do with results being better than not results.

The point of setting goals and creating results is what we learn in the process and who we become. Now, if you're an underactor, you're just not doing that because nothing's happening, but it's also not happening if you're an overactor.

If you're just rushing from result to result, churning out achievements as fast as you can, hustling for your self-worth the whole way, driven by desperation, you're not learning anything and you're not becoming anyone different anyway. You're just going through the motions.

So you might be creating results but you're not getting the value of setting goals and creating results for yourself from a managed mind. That's why one is not better than the other. Who cares if you produce a result if you do it from kind of frantic negative energy and you don't learn anything about yourself and you don't grow?

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I don't believe that good results come out of that in the sense of like, results that add value to your life and add value to the world. You can have an equally meaningless life doing nothing and letting yourself off the hook for doing nothing, or constantly chasing achievement and always discounting it once you get it and just hustling onto the next thing, constantly chasing your self-worth.

Now again, this is always of course, only about what you want to create for yourself. Nobody has to write a book if they don't want to write a book. Nobody needs to have a coaching business if they don't want to have a coaching business. Your result you want to create might be doing 10 minutes of yoga in the morning or not yelling at your kids until after noon.

Whatever it is, this is not about everyone has to create massive, massive things in the world. It's whatever you're calling to create, whatever kind of life you want to have, whether you want to be the first woman president, or you want to live in a cabin in the woods. I don't care which one that is. what I care about is whether you are able to create that life for yourself.

And neither underacting nor overacting is the way to do it. So both underactors and overactors need to take honest stock of what they're doing and apply the correct remedy. You both want to try to move towards the middle, to the place of balance.

And balanced action is setting goals and achieving them for the process, for the journey. It's not about the end result and even whether you ever get exactly there. They want to see what they'll learn about themselves or the world, or what skills they'll develop for the joy of that process. That's what it's like to be a balanced actor.

Balanced actors appreciate everything that they have accomplished and can be comfortable resting and not taking action as well. They aren't in a

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rush to achieve any particular goal or outcome because they know the destination will always feel like the journey.

So, they're always focused on how to show up now in service of the person they are now, and the person they want to become. Balanced actors are kind to themselves. They have their own back. They tell themselves the truth, which is the kindest thing you can do about where they're doing the work and where they aren't.

Even if they're going to decide not to do the work in a certain area, they tell themselves the truth about that. They don't believe their own excuses; they don't buy their own bullshit. And so, they're able to create results when they want to in the right way, for the right reasons. That is the goal.

So, if you're in The Clutch, I want you to post in the Facebook group which one you think you are, either in general or in some area you're working on. And if you're sure which one you are, then I want you to come join The Clutch so I can help you figure it out.

Because knowing which one you are, whether it's an overall personality or it's a particular goal or area of your life, it's crucial to knowing how to best coach yourself. Because you can't see your own blind spot, and you need to know the medicine is not the same because it depends on what the problem is.

If you want to create results outside of yourself that are aligned with your internal world and are in service to you, rather than the other way around, you have to know which your tendency is and how to correct it. Alright my overactive and underactive chickens, and the few of you who may already be balanced actors, I will talk to you next week.

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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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