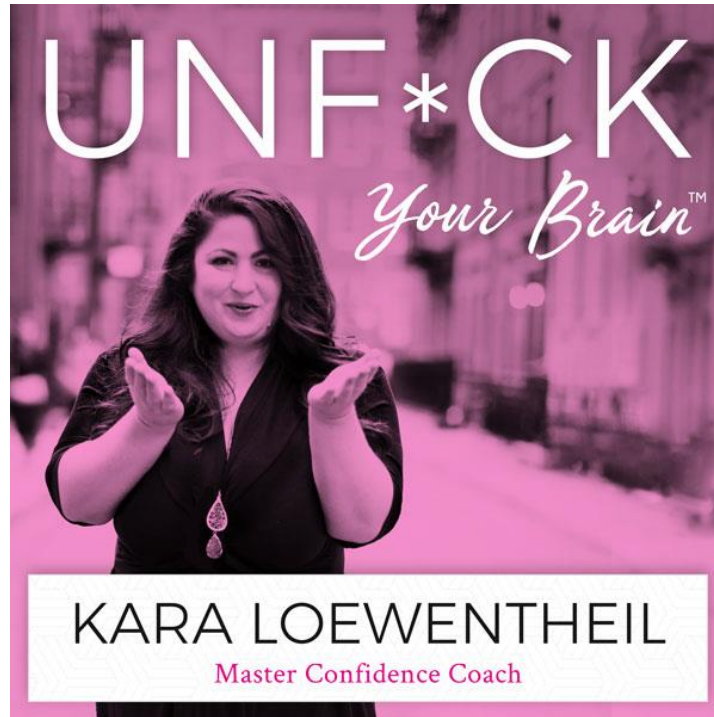


UFYB 145: Mental Flexibility



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? I am loving my life right now and that's not because it's externally perfect. We're still in the middle of a pandemic and I think that I'm out of clean underwear and I'm going through my own mental and emotional challenges and coaching myself and I'm getting coaching.

All of that is happening. But my options are to resent reality or to love it. And if I decide to love life, even in a pandemic, that doesn't mean the pandemic is getting away with something. Me deciding to love life, even in a pandemic, doesn't make the pandemic more or less likely to infect people.

Hating life in a pandemic is not going to teach it a lesson or change how the virus works. Loving life in a pandemic doesn't mean I suddenly lose my ability to grasp how science works or stop caring if other people live or die. All it means is that I get to enjoy the present moment of my life, which is the only moment that I'm guaranteed to have.

If I knew that I was going to die next week, would I want to spend this week hating my life? The answer to that is no, of course. Before COVID, I probably would have said, well, I love my life because I get to travel, and I teach all over the world and I love doing that.

And now in COVID, I think I love my life because I get to stay home and be cozy and not go anywhere. And those seem like direct opposites, but both were and are true at the time that I was and am thinking them. This is what I call mental flexibility, and that's what I want to teach you about today.

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I've talked before about emotional resilience. The skill you can develop through thought work of being less reactive to the world around you or your own brain. Emotional resilience helps you learn to live on a more even keel, where you still experience the full range of human life, but you don't have such big swings and crashes and you don't feel out of control and at the mercy of your feelings.

Most of us are too changeable in our emotions and we have to learn how to bring it all down to smaller variants, smaller swings, so that we feel more stable. We work on that so much in The Clutch. That's one of the main things that you learn in the first few weeks as you start to get introduced to these materials and these tools.

But most of us are not changeable enough in our thoughts. We are not able to swing wildly in our thoughts. We are rigid and attached to what we already think and believe, and that is why mental flexibility is such an important concept.

Mental flexibility is the capacity, the skill of training your brain to be open to new ideas, new thoughts, and new perspectives. Brains do not like to be challenged or to be wrong. When that happens, we tend to experience a phenomenon known as cognitive dissonance.

So cognitive dissonance is the mental tension that is caused by the conflict between two different ideas or thoughts which contradict each other. And the way humans deal with that is by unconsciously dismissing the new conflicting idea and doubling down in their belief on the first idea.

So this is why if you are talking to someone, they've done studies on this, if you don't believe in climate change and you are shown evidence of climate change, it doesn't change your mind. It actually makes your brain find reasons to dismiss or reject the evidence.

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It's overhyped, scientists are biased, it's happening but it's not manmade, whatever the arguments are. People will actually report believing more strongly in their original belief after it's been challenged. And this is why trying to persuade someone of a different opinion is so often frustrating and backfires.

You may actually just prompt their brain to get more entrenched in their original belief. And if this is happening to you, it's okay. It doesn't mean that there's something wrong with you, that you're stubborn, that you're stupid, or that these other people necessarily are stubborn or stupid. It's an unconscious process that happens because our brains don't want to be wrong.

Our brains have to filter and interpret so much information every day. We use a lot of shortcuts. I've talked about this on the podcast before. We want to just know when we look at a table that it's a table. Our brain just uses a shortcut. That's a table. There's four legs on it, there's four sticking protuberances down to the floor, there's a flat surface, it's a table.

Rather than every time you wake up in the morning being like, wait, what is that? What is that shape? Why is it there? What does it do? If your brain had to re-evaluate every single thing every time it thought about it, you would never be able to get out of bed.

So, your brain just likes to have a shortcut and it doesn't want to be wrong about that. That seems dangerous. It's exhausting, it would be overwhelming, and what if we're wrong about who we can trust or what food is safe or whatever else. Our brain thinks that being wrong is dangerous, that it's exhausting, and we might die.

So, your brain would rather be certain, even if it's wrong, because your brain does not want to be destabilized. It doesn't want to think, oh my god,

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what else might I be wrong about? Our brains experience that as a threat, as if you came out in the morning and all of a sudden, your table was walking and talking, you would be super freaked out.

This is an unconscious process. The good news is that we can bring it into consciousness and work on changing it in the places that we want to. So we can let it continue running unconsciously for identifying objects and being able to drive without thinking very carefully about every moment. That's why it's easy to drive after you've done it for a while and it's terrifying the first time.

We can let our brain do this unconscious process wherever we don't really care about changing our thoughts, but we can learn to change the process in the places that it would serve us to do so. Thought work is what can allow us to develop the skill of being mentally or emotionally comfortable without losing our shit.

Because that's really what's going on. When your brain experiences cognitive dissonance, it's uncomfortable and it thinks it's going to die. And so instead of allowing that discomfort and being curious about it, it just doubles down on its original belief. It's mental rigidity. It just puts its foot down, it's like, no, this is it, I'm standing firm, I'm gripping to this, this is the only truth.

Learning to allow the discomfort that will just come up in your brain and body when your thoughts are challenged is a skill that you can learn. That is what produces mental flexibility. Ironically, this can be a matter of life or death. Our brain thinks that mental rigidity will keep us safe, but just look at the COVID pandemic.

People's cognitive dissonance is preventing them from being able to change their minds to adapt to new data. So, no matter how much

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evidence there is that COVID is real and killing people, people who are invested in believing the opposite won't change their minds.

I think as a culture, we are particularly resistant to changing our minds. I do believe humans are like this in general, for all the reasons I just described. It's evolutionary psychology. But I think in the US, we seem to almost delight in our stubbornness. We look down on expertise and critical analysis.

We have this kind of fetish about the common man and the average American and that person being smarter and more capable than anyone with any fancy learning and every man is his own cowboy and hero. It's very masculine, it's very kind of anti-education.

I won't turn this into a sociology 101 lecture on American exceptionalism, but the point is that between culture and biology, we are really predisposed to never want to change our minds. We want to believe we are and we're right, and if we don't manage our minds, we won't change our thoughts, even in response to new facts or evidence or ideas. And that is what creates mental rigidity.

We want to be certain because we think we will be safe that way, but we're not safe when we're like that. We're rigid. It makes us blind. Mental flexibility is the ability to contemplate new ideas and be open to changing your mind. It's that famous quote, the author of whom I did not look up before I started recording this podcast.

But the quote is that consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. And there's a grain of truth in that. Of course, as a coach, I know and teach that consistency in your practice and in your efforts is crucial. I am not suggesting we just blindly hold contradictory beliefs without ever examining them.

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But what the quote gets at is that there is a power of imagination and intellect required to see things from multiple perspectives, to hold two competing thoughts or ideas at the same time. That's a level of intellectual sophistication that I think we all should aspire to because it will be so useful for us in our lives.

To look at a circumstance and see how two people can have totally different thoughts about it and neither is more objectively true than the other because they're both true to the person who holds them. They seem true to that person.

This skill is crucial for thought work because thought work is all about coming to believe new things that you haven't believed before. And I think sometimes we expect this should be easy. As if we just had never heard of this other thought we could think, but that as soon as we hear it, we will totally adopt it.

That's not how it works. When I give you a new thought to practice if I'm coaching you in The Clutch or if you come up with a new thought on your own or you get one from the other Clutch coaches or in the Facebook group or you're doing your daily thought download, you're listening to the podcast and a new thought pops into your brain, you're not starting from ground zero.

It's not just fresh ground to plant a new thing in. There's a reason you haven't thought of it before usually because your whole brain system is usually based on thoughts contrary or contradictory to the new one. Now listen, this is not always the case, especially with smaller things.

Sometimes we think a new thought and we're just off to the races. But when we're challenging really deeply held beliefs that we've had about ourselves for a long time, that's not usually how it works. It's not just that

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you never thought to believe that you can, let's say, make as much money as you want as an artist.

It's not that you had no thoughts about making money as an artist, and now you've discovered you can have this great one. Usually, the case is that you already subconsciously believe you cannot make as much money as you want as an artist. You see what I mean? It's not just there was a void of thoughts about this subject and now you've heard a new one.

Sometimes that does happen. But often, especially with these deep-seeded thoughts, things we've thought for a long time, we're not starting from just a void. We're starting from a whole belief system built around the opposite belief. Even if it was subconscious.

It's not just that it never occurred to you to believe you can have an amazing romantic relationship. It's not like there was just a void of thoughts about dating. The issue is that you already subconsciously believe that you cannot have one for whatever reasons you've come up with.

So, we're not just starting from the void when we introduce a new thought, in which case, maybe it wouldn't matter if we were flexible. We could just come up with this new thought and that would be great. But usually, we're starting from an opposite premise that we've been living by, and now we're trying to believe something totally contradictory.

Mental flexibility is the capacity to be introduced to a new thought or idea that challenges your existing belief structures and not immediately reject it. This doesn't mean you have to go straight to believing the new thought 1000% because you can't yet most of the time. That's why mental flexibility is so important.

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Mental flexibility is the skill, the practice that helps you get through this uncomfortable period where you believe both things. Mental flexibility is what allows you to simultaneously hold two conflicting beliefs. Your old belief that you have to be a starving artist and your new belief that you can be a wealthy artist.

You believe both of them on and off, depending on which one you're thinking at any moment. You're working on believing the new one more and more, but you still believe the old one. If you're mentally rigid, then you can't cope with this, with this dissonance, with the conflict, with the discomfort that comes up with considering what if you were wrong.

And your brain's total cascade of terror that that might mean you're wrong about everything and that tables aren't table and the whole world is collapsing. That's what gets triggered on a primitive level sometimes when we contradict a thought, and then we feel so much resistance we just give up and we think it means something has gone wrong, we resist the old thought, and we freak out.

The refusal to allow both to be true ironically means you usually end up defaulting to the old belief since you're not ready for it to go away yet. But if you can allow both to exist in your mind, if you can practice mental flexibility, then you can strengthen the new belief until it becomes the only one that seems true to you anymore.

Something rigid, if you try to change it, if you need to make it shorter or wider or if you need to bend it or if you need to reshape it, it'll break. Apply any force to something too rigid and it'll snap. But something flexible can be shaped and molded into something different.

So the way you practice this is by leaning into the discomfort you feel when someone offers you a thought that contradicts your own. Whether it's

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coaching or politics or any area of life. It's just a thought, it can't hurt you. Looking at it to see if it might be true to that person or true for you in some way or a thought you might want to entertain is not dangerous.

Your brain thinks it's a threat but it's not. It's just a thought. So, allow that discomfort that comes up. It may feel even physical. That's okay. Breathe through it. Try to examine the thought honestly, as if you've just woken up from a coma and you didn't know that you already disagreed with it.

It doesn't mean you have to end up deciding to accept and believe it and change your original thought. But the ability to see how and why this thought might be true for someone else or could be true for you is crucial.

There's one other thing about mental flexibility that I want to point out for you all, which is that one of the upsides of practicing this skill is that it allows you to hold competing truths in your mind about yourself, which makes it an amazing tool for practicing self-compassion and acceptance.

I said competing truths, but really, I just mean competing thoughts. If you are willing to be mentally flexible and allow for contradiction, it means you can look at yourself and you can, rather than just see yourself as negative because you're not perfectly positive, you can see that you're two different things at the same time.

You're a mom who yells at your kids and you're a mom who's patient with your kids. It just depends on the moment. You're a supportive partner and you're a non-supportive partner sometimes. Just depends on the moment. You haven't made a lot of money yet and you're someone who's going to make a lot of money in the future.

We think we have to be all one or all the other, but being a human isn't that simple. Sometimes we think, feel, and act one way, sometimes another.

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We're both, most of us, most of the time. And all of it is okay. And the irony is always that we think resisting what we don't like about ourselves will change it. But in fact, it's accepting and allowing that you are both that allows you to move more into alignment with the thing you want to be.

The same is true with thoughts. Allowing that you believe both things, the new thought and the old thought is what allows you to practice without so much drama, moving into alignment with the new thought that you want to believe. Growing and evolving and becoming the person you want to be and challenging some of your most fundamental beliefs about yourself is not always going to feel good. It's going to feel uncomfortable and destabilizing and we want to lean into that.

You don't get flexible hips by just feeling relaxed. You get them by little bit by little bit pushing yourself, pushing your body past where it naturally goes. Not pushing it with no regard for it straight into pain, but just pushing a little bit farther than you're comfortable and holding there for a moment, and then going back. And the same thing is true with your thoughts.

You don't get a flexible brain just by magic. You get it by practicing the skill of holding contradictory ideas or thoughts together in your mind, allowing them to both be there, allowing someone to suggest the opposite of what you think without freaking out, being open to hearing how something you immediately disagree with might be true.

That is how you develop mental flexibility. The more willing you are to adopt a new thought, even when it contradicts your current beliefs, the more radically your life will change and the more mentally flexible you are, the less time it ends up taking to shift those thoughts. But you have to earn that flexibility by practicing and building up the skill.

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So that is what I suggest you work on this week. And if you want some help with that and you don't feel like you know how to do it on your own, that is what The Clutch is for. Come join us. The website and the text you can use are in the little outdo music that's about to happen soon. I'll talk to you guys 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 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.

Come join us at www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. Or you can just text your email address to 347-934-8861. If you text your email address to that number, we'll text you right back with a link to check out everything you need to know about The Clutch. 347-934-8861 or again, just go online to www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. I cannot wait to see you there.