

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

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? You may hear a rushing sound in the background. It's because there was a crazy tropical storm yesterday and so these are not words I ever thought I would say on my podcast, but the creek is running high in the backyard. So it might be a little loud.

Other than that, how are we doing? I am amazing as usual. I have been doing some really deep work on myself in my own personal life and when I'm really engaging with my thought work and digging into my brain; it just reminds me of how powerful and life-changing all of this work truly is.

And I was talking to my coach the other day, yes, I still get coached. We all need an outside perspective on our brain, so this is why I laugh when people are like, "I think I can just figure it out from the podcast." I'm like, good luck because I write the podcast and I've been doing this for years and I teach and coach other people at a world-class level and I still need some outside eyes on my brain.

So I was talking about how one of the reasons that I feel so passionately about this work and its relationship to social justice is because of the work I did on my own internalized fat bias and fat phobia. And in talking to her about it, I was talking about the body image class that I just wrapped up inside The Clutch.

We did a Clutch College online body image course that was so amazing and kind of going through that material with my students again and coaching them on it really brought up for me all the work that I did on this myself. And I realized that I do talk about the subject often obviously, I talk

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

about body image a lot, but I don't think that I have done a whole episode where I really go deep into this story in terms of my personal story.

And I also realized that I've had kind of conflicting feelings about it because on the one hand, I do believe that the experience I had working on my thoughts about body image and weight and size are where I really learned what it's like to use thought work to truly decondition yourself from internalized oppression.

But I mostly talk about that kind of work through the lens of patriarchy and sexism usually. In a funny way, although I for sure have had sexist socializing that I have done a lot of unpacking on, I'm still unpacking, I'll probably always be unpacking, I don't even remember a time that I wasn't aware of kind of sexism and patriarchy and being a feminist.

Obviously I guess at some point I was, but pretty early I learned about it and everything I can remember of my own intellectual development I already was aware of feminist, I already was aware of sexism and marginalization and oppression of women and I was sort of awake and alive to that.

And similarly for racial justice because obviously I don't experience racial oppression myself as a White woman. Jews have not always historically been considered White and today's America, we generally are. But I was still raised talking about it at the dinner table, very aware of it, my mother was a federal public defender and so we talked a lot about racial injustice in America, the criminal justice system, all sorts of things.

So there were social justice movements, both that I was a part of and that I was not a part of but wanted to be an ally to that I was aware of from the very beginning that I can remember. So by the time I discovered thought work, I was already very politically grounded in those areas in feminism.

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

I had at least the intellectual beliefs about equality and patriarchy and socialization, so I was intellectually aware about it. And thought work helped me actually change my thought patterns, but I did have this kind of running start in that I already could tell that I had kind of internalized my own sexism or I had internalized society's sexism.

I was awake and aware about that, and I could see that it was a problem. And again, not to say that work is done. I'm currently doing really deep work right now on my thoughts around my romantic relationships and seeing even more subtle layers of it there. There's always more work to do.

The bottom line is I came to thought work knowing I was a feminist, feeling really solid about that, thinking that was an amazing thing about me, knowing that I didn't want to believe what society had taught me about being a woman, and thought work was a tool for doing that.

So with feminism, it's like I came to thought work already having the problem diagnosed, and then thought work was like, oh, this is the tool that will help me actually change it. My experience with fat bias and fat phobia and I'm going to be using terms like fat bias, fat phobia, sizeism interchangeably, even though semantically we could argue about the differences, they all kind of mean the same thing to me in this context.

So my experience with sizeism was different, and I talk a lot about my body image journey and that's a term that I use, both because it's true, it is about body image, but also because it's something more people have heard of and understand.

So many people are steeped in diet culture that the idea of fat phobia or fat bias actually just sounds to them like kind of a normal good belief system that they should have, or that they think they don't have, as if they're size blind.

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

It just doesn't even sound like a bad phobia or ism to many people. There's not the same cultural awareness that there is around sexism or racism or some other forms of isms or phobias. And you'll find even people who are very active and educated and aware in one area of social justice work will have a complete blind spot about sizeism.

And I was one of those people when I started doing the work. When I started understanding and learning about sizeism and fat phobia and fat bias, it was not like sexism where I already understood how socialization had fucked me up. I had already disassociated my intellectual values from patriarchy and I just needed to understand how to implement it at an emotional level.

With sexism, I didn't yet have the tools to do the emotional work to change my internalized sexism, but I saw those thoughts for what they were, not all of them, but I was aware of quite a few of them and I knew I didn't want to live by them, even though I didn't yet know how to stop believing them.

And again, of course there have been many deeper layers that I've uncovered in this work, but I was just aware of the concept. I identified as a feminist; I knew that I was believing things society had taught me about being a woman that I didn't want to believe. I just didn't know how to stop.

But when it came to fat phobia and internalized fat bias, it was very different. I was 100% deep captured by the ideology. I was completely in it, by which I mean I totally believed the dominant beliefs of the system. So that's what I mean when I saw deep captured. I was not looking in from the outside, I was not aware that they were optional thoughts. I just 100% believed them all.

I believed that being fat was ugly, I believed that being fat was unhealthy, I believed that being fat was a moral failing on my part or anyone else's part,

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

a lack of character, a problem with who I was as a person. Ironically of course at the time, I wasn't even really fat.

People have different definitions, but at the time I started doing this thought work around these issues, I had successfully basically restricted, binged, purged, dieted my way down over many years to around a size 16 or so. Kind of the top of the "normal" range.

So I was fat by diet culture's standards, but not by fat positive standards. But of course I thought I was fat. That seemed 100% true. And I was completely saturated. My brain was saturated in diet culture. I believed that I would not be good enough until I was thin. I believed that I wouldn't be loved until I was thin. I believed I wouldn't be attractive until I was thin.

And of course, like any of you who believe this now, that meant that if somebody did love me or think I was attractive, I automatically devalued them and their opinion because they were obviously stupid and wrong. And all of this internalized fat phobia impacted every area of my life.

I thought about what I was eating and whether or not I was exercising and my weight and my body constantly. I can't overemphasize it, but I know a lot of you are living it too. My weight was the story of my life. It was a huge focus in my household growing up, it was a huge focus among all my peers at school.

Not necessarily my weight in terms of my peers at school, but just people's weight, weight in general certainly was my focus, comparing myself to my peers. It was my whole identity. The culture completely validated that this was a thing to be constantly concerned about.

And even though of course looking back my weight fluctuated over the years, it was never even close to the size I am now because I spent literally

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

all my extra time and energy trying to control it. Trying to restrict, not being able to restrict because the human body does not respond well to restriction mentally or physically.

Then bingeing and purging. I spent 20 years in that cycle. It was just all consuming. And when I wasn't obsessing over that, I was thinking about all the other areas of my life where I believed that my weight was holding me back.

I blamed my weight for not having the romantic relationship I wanted. In reality, I actually was dating perfectly nice, smart, decent men, but because they wanted to date me in my body, which I hated, I automatically devalued them. It was totally a Catch 22.

I wanted a certain kind of relationship, anybody who would date me in this body is obviously not that relationship. I wanted to be a life coach, but I thought I couldn't possibly be a fat life coach. How could anyone take a coach seriously who hadn't solved her weight problem because that was the number one problem in a person's life to solve?

And I judged other people by this metric too in a way that is - thank god I don't shame myself and I have humor about this because it was hilariously just myopic. I distinctly remember I went and saw this famous very skilled meditation teacher who is truly a marvel, and I studied with her since and really learned from her, but at the time, when I went to see her, rather than absorb and learn from her presence and wisdom, I literally sat there thinking, "She can't really know what she's doing because she's fat."

As if knowing how to meditate meant you would be thin automatically. This is what fat phobia does. It makes us devalue anything a fat person might be able to offer because it relates everything back to their fatness as the most determinative thing about them.

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

Fatness is associated with anything bad, and thinness is associated with anything good. And in my fucked up brain at the time, and I don't say that to judge it, it was just a human brain trying to do its best, but my unexamined belief system was totally fucking it up.

In my mind at that time, meditation was about inner peace, and inner peace meant you evolved as a human, so clearly anyone with inner peace wouldn't be fat. That just didn't compute in my brain.

I didn't actually know the science about health or weight or what causes people's size yet, so I just assumed that anyone - which is what we're taught - anyone who was fat was either overeating, either because they were sort of a gluttonous lazy pig or whatever we're taught, or they were emotionally eating. Something negative was going on clearly, and an evolved person clearly wouldn't do either of those things.

That was my thought process. And that is because I viewed any activity in relation to weight loss. That was the central orb that all the threads always came back to. I don't know what that metaphor is, but it was like the critical lens that I used to view the world.

And this is another way that internalized fat phobia impoverishes our mental and emotional landscape because it makes us make everything about this one thing. Meditation, will it help me lose weight by stopping emotional eating? Then maybe I'm interested in it and that's how I'll judge it.

Yoga, will it help me lose weight by burning calories or making me not want to eat as much? If that's going to work, then I'm into it. Taking a French class, will it help me lose weight by distracting me from eating or make me more like a French woman who I think is not going to be fat? That is what my thought process always was.

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

Being fat and needing to lose weight to be attractive and be acceptable and be loved was the main lens through which I viewed the entire world. And it was a lens that was completely created by diet culture and was reinforced everywhere I looked.

I was just all the way in the matrix. I didn't even know I was in a matrix. I just thought this was all the truth. Now, ironically and amusingly, I discovered thought work through the last weight loss program I ever tried. It was called Weight School. It was taught by two women who are now my dear friends and mentors, coaches, Brooke Castillo and Susan Hyatt.

And at the time, what they were teaching in Weight School was basically a combination of intuitive eating and thought work, I would say. That was kind of the gist. I was not nearly ready for intuitive eating principles at that time, but the thought work blew my fucking mind.

And so I started using the thought work on my thoughts about why I needed to be thin and hating myself for not being thin, which is something that Brooke and Susan taught as part of the course. I mean, I actually get asked quite a lot how I can be sort of friends with weight loss coaches or associated with weight loss coaches, and I will say that the reason that I - number one, it's a lot of thought work.

But I like my reasons because all of the coaches that I am friends or colleagues with who do teach weight loss, we may disagree on the sort of statistical and science background of how much and how often people can lose weight and keep it off, but they all are teaching women to love and accept themselves, and that changing their weight is not what's going to do that.

And so we're sort of allied on that much more important foundational principle. So all that is to say I was being taught in this course, that that

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

was something to do thought work on, that hating myself for not being - I couldn't hate myself into weight loss. They were teaching that.

But for me, once I started doing that thought work, it just became obvious that if I truly resolved all that self-loathing and self-hatred, then I didn't have a reason to lose weight. There was no point or need to do so if I stopped hating my body the way it was.

I was not quite ready to let go of weight loss totally at that point, and I also had been using food to cope emotionally. I'd been emotionally eating because I'd spent 30 years without any coping tools. And I also don't think that emotional eating is always a terrible thing. I think all humans buffer to some extent. We just want to know when we're doing it, be compassionate towards ourselves, reduce it where we can and want to.

But anyway, point is there are so many different threads of this conversation. So after I did Weight School, I was like, wait, if I love my body the way it is, I actually don't need to lose weight. But I was still at that point, I think I was still bingeing and purging because I just still had a lot of shame and thoughts around if not my weight, but then my eating habits.

I mean, your brain is always moving the goal post. So I started working with an intuitive eating nutritionist, really a registered dietician. And I was not ready for intuitive eating at all. I was just so psychologically scarred by diet culture and my experience with diet culture. I was just not ready to go there yet.

So that work didn't really go anywhere yet. I had only just started using thought work to change those thoughts, but it led me to learn more about the health at any size movement, which is a movement for kind of scientific accuracy in what we are taught and what people study about the relationship between health and weight.

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

Most of what you hear in mainstream medical world is totally distorted. This is not the people who say that COVID mainstream doctors aren't telling the truth and so listen to these people on YouTube. What I mean by mainstream is just when you look at the actual scientific studies in the peer-reviewed journals on weight and health, they don't say the same thing as what the media and sort of doctors who get a half hour of nutrition studies in medical school think they say.

So it's not science denial. It's actually looking at the actual science and not just parroting the social ideology. So I started learning more about health at any size, and if you want more about that, the preeminent researcher is a person named Linda Bacon. You can find their work out there, health at any size is the term. There's plenty of stuff online.

And anti-diet culture in general. So once I started learning about that, I signed up for another coaching program all about body image and diet culture. See, when I tell you to get your butt in The Clutch because you need a coaching program, I speak from experience. This is how I have grown too.

And so what I found was that combining these two things was super powerful. So in the body image anti-diet coaching work that I was learning, I was getting a serious education in - for me, that program was less about coaching and it was more like a one-on-one course in diet culture and fat positivity.

I was just learning some facts that I had been missing about what causes people's weight, how health and weight are correlated or not, what the physical effects of yo-yo dieting, your body's set point, all this science stuff, which again, you can Google if you want to learn more.

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

That is what I was learning in that, and then at the same time, I had the thought work. Because what I saw without the thought work angle, the people that I was - my sort of fellow students who were learning about this anti-diet framework, there were a couple of issues with how it was impacting people who didn't have the thought work part.

For some people, rather than making them feel stronger, it actually created this kind of new fragility where they couldn't handle being around other people who were still in diet culture and they were very triggered by all of diet culture that they now could recognize, or they became very angry and resentful. All totally natural reactions when you don't know how to manage your mind.

But because we weren't being taught a method for necessarily integrating what we were learning to change our thoughts, it was sort of like awareness. It was like a new political awareness but without kind of the emotional tools that people needed.

And so I combined those two frameworks, the thought work that I had learned and then this new knowledge, and that was explosive. That was mind-blowing. It was the first major work I did on my own mind. And I am not going to lie, it was both mind-blowing and also it was a slog to actually change those thought patterns.

I was new to the tools, I did not have that much background in using them yet, and I had learned thought work in general from my coaches, but you all have me to teach you how to do this, how to use thought work on body image and fat positivity. I was in the wilderness with my own brain. Nobody was combining them for me.

But that experience is why I know that thought work can change everything about how you see the world. Because what I went through was not just a

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

personal transformation, it was actually a political awakening too. Before that period, I honestly don't remember. I either just didn't know that much about discrimination against fat people, which I think is probably correct.

I probably just had never really researched it and didn't know that much about it, or I just thought it was justified because my self-loathing was so deep. I think probably both. Part of the problem with discrimination against fat people is that so many fat people are totally bought into the idea that being fat is bad and wrong.

So they don't want to ally themselves with other fat people. They want to ally themselves with thin people because they want to someday be thin and they have bought this pervasive fantasy that someday they'll be thin if they just try hard enough.

It's like people who under current economic policies can't make a living wage and then they ally themselves mentally and vote with billionaires because there's this myth that they might someday get super rich too.

So as I started to learn more about fat phobia and sizeism, I learned how much discrimination there is. Studies show - and again, this could be an entire three-year podcast and there are podcasts out there you can Google. Studies show that weight discrimination is as common as racial discrimination and age discrimination and it is - some studies show that it is more common than racial discrimination for women.

But of course, if you live in multiple intersecting identities, if you are a woman of color who is also a fat woman, even more possibility of discrimination. It's more common than discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability these days. And it impacts women more severely than men.

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

So this is how intersectionality works. If you're a woman, you may experience discrimination. If you're a fat person, you may experience discrimination. If you're a fat woman, you're doubly likely to experience discrimination. If you're a fat woman of color, triply likely.

It's all around us. Children as young as three years old exhibit weight bias that they have picked up from their parents or society. Fat people just experience discrimination in housing, employment, dating, healthcare access, and every other area you can think of.

And one of the things that is so kind of pervasive about this particular ideology is that it doesn't just kick in at some certain level of fatness. It is exacerbated for sure. The bigger you are, the more likely you are to experience the discrimination on the basis of it, but people well within normal weight ranges, women especially are constantly critiquing themselves, judging themselves, and other people based on their size.

I think fat discrimination is not as prevalent in the general consciousness for a few reasons. First, because the political movement for fat rights and anti-sizeism discrimination is historically fairly new. Last 50 years or so I would say. And because being fat is seen as a choice or at least changeable, as a moral failing or character issue, and so the identity politics around it are different than some other forms of marginalization.

So anyway, this again, could be a whole thousand series podcast. But the point for our purposes here and for my story is that in this process, I was learning the truth about weight and health and how much control people do or don't have over their size. And I was learning to identify myself accurately as a member of a group that we are socialized to see as inferior. And to let go of the fantasy that I was ever going to magically escape this group.

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

But thankfully, I also had thought work. So I had the power to decide how I wanted to think and feel about all of this. About the science of weight and health and size and how changeable it is or not, about the statistics about discrimination and the impacts, about the politics around it, all of it.

I knew that I got to decide what I wanted to believe. I got to decide what I wanted to believe about the realities of the world. The reality of this world is that many people have thoughts in their brains about fat people that cause them to feel a certain way and act a certain way, just like any other stereotype or ideology.

And sometimes that's going to include thoughts about me on that basis. And I got to decide what I wanted to believe about what was possible for me in my life. In my career, in my romantic life, in my family life, in any area.

I'm not saying it was easy. It took a lot of rewiring. Because one of the trickiest aspects when you go through this is that some of the political realities I was learning about seemed to confirm my negative thoughts about myself.

So let's break this down. If I have the thought my body is too fat for anyone to love me, again, even though I was in relationships, irrelevant when your brain thinks that way. My thought is my body is too fat for someone to love me, and then what I learn is that there's massive discrimination against fat women in dating, let's say, then my brain says, see?

But of course that's going to happen. I learned this thought from society, which has been teaching this thought to lots of other people too, who are then going to act on it. And that's going to produce more evidence for me that those things are true.

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

The model is happening on a social level. Thoughts create results. It's such a mind fuck so it's important to understand it. When our negative thoughts about ourselves are internalized social messaging, it's easy to find evidence outside of us that seems to confirm that it's true.

But it doesn't confirm it's true. It just confirms other people have been taught similar thoughts. We're always going to be surrounded by at least some evidence that we could use to support our internalized bullshit because other people were also taught that internalized bullshit and they don't know about thought work, so they're acting on it.

But they are the only people out there. There are always going to be people who don't share those thoughts. That's what makes the world a magical place. So for me, this transformation didn't require me to believe that weight discrimination or sizeism doesn't exist. That's not what I choose to believe. I just choose to believe it's not all that exists.

And it's not in control of what I can accomplish or what I can have in my life. Will it be more of an uphill battle for me in some areas? Maybe. But I can decide even whether that's a negative or a positive. Why would my life be better if it all just came to me easily? If that were the case, I wouldn't have developed any of the knowledge of my own mind that I have now and that I can teach all of you.

I choose to believe that the one thing I can control is my own attitude, my own belief in myself, my own willingness to risk rejection without using it to confirm my worst fears, my own drive and determination, my own neuroplasticity. Let me be really clear. When I say I can control this, I think some of you think that means so I can control it 100% all the time and if you don't, you're doing it wrong and not good enough.

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

No. It doesn't mean that I can control every single thought in my brain at all times. But it means that I'm always committed to the idea that I am working towards the possibility. I am committed to the belief that my thoughts are something that I can have a say in and I can decide, even if I can't live up to that perfectly all the time.,

I am so passionate about this work to undo social conditioning because I lived through this process. And while there are still areas where my brain occasionally wakes up from slumber like a dragon and just grumbles, "This would be easier if you were thin." It's like an old thought.

99% of the time, I truly do not think about my weight. I don't criticize my body to myself. In fact, I admire it. I look at it on purpose and enjoy it. I'm convinced there are amazing men out there who are interested in me in this body, and no surprise, that's what I found.

I am much fatter now than I ever was when I hated my body and my dating and sex life are so much better now. I believe that my size is my superpower as a coach. Not my downfall. I told myself for years that I couldn't do this because nobody would hire a fat coach, and now what I believe is people hire me because of that.

There are fat women who hire me because I look like them and I can understand their thoughts and experiences and because if I can be confident, I must know something. And I've had thin women tell me that they hired me because of their own internalized fat phobia. Isn't that so fascinating?

My thought originally was thin women will think that a fat woman is bad and doesn't have control of herself and can't teach them anything, and in fact - and some of them may think that and they're not my clients and that's fine. But what some of them think is, "God damn, I hate my body and I look

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

much more like what we're told women are supposed to look like. If she can love her body, she's got to know something that I need to know. That confidence tells me that she has something to teach me."

I don't tell myself that there's anything in my life I can't have because of how I look. I never worried I couldn't have what I wanted because I was too feminist because I loved that about myself. And now I feel the same way about my size.

And because of that, because I did not and do not accept society's oppression of fat people as justified or acceptable or reasonable, because I decided not to let society tell me what I had to think of myself, I have been able to teach women all over the world to love their bodies and accept themselves too.

The world didn't have to change for me to feel differently and for my life to change, but the world is going to change now because I'm going to change it. I am changing it. And all of the women I teach are changing it too. We are all going to change it together starting with our minds.

That's my sermon for you this week, my chickens. Go out, change the world. And if you want help with your body image, with your internalized fat phobia, with your sizeism, join The Clutch. We are doing deep work on this. Unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. Listen to the outro and you'll get a number to text us. I'll see you there.

If this episode really reached you, I want you to come check out The Clutch because it will give you all the tools you need to learn how to start loving yourself and your body exactly the way it is. You will get an introductory self-coaching course, which includes a deep dive into one of the most powerful tools I teach, the thought ladder, which is the exact tool I used to build my body confidence and go from hating my body to truly loving it.

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](http://UnfuckYourBrain.com)

UFYB 149: Diet Culture, Internalized Oppression, & Fat Bias - My Story

And then once you've learned how to coach yourself, you also get a whole bonus workbook on how to unfuck your body image, which teaches you a step by step process to shifting your thoughts about yourself, no matter what they are now.

I want you to imagine what it would feel like to not spend so much time and mental energy thinking about your body and what's wrong with it and how it should look different and what you ate and how you worked out and vowing to start that new diet and exercise regimen tomorrow, or Googling how much plastic surgery costs. All those things we do when we're obsessed with hating the way we look.

I want you to imagine a life where you don't even think about how you look that often, and when you do, you feel positive about it. That is a possible reality for you, to love the way that you look and to love your body. And you can make it a reality with what I teach you in The Clutch.

So go to unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch or you can just text your email to 347-934-8861 and we will send a link straight to your phone to check out all the information. You truly can escape the prison of negative body image and I hope that you will do this for yourself. I'll see you there.