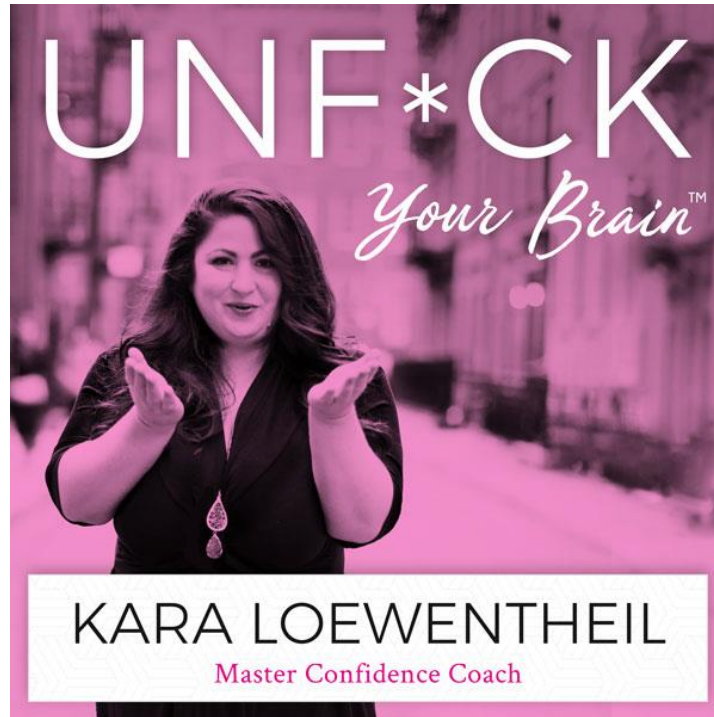


UFYB 151: Maximalism



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 amusing myself with the title of this podcast because it's so extra, kind of. But that's exactly what I want to talk to you about today on the podcast because I think that in the life coaching and influencer and online lifestyle worlds, which are obviously three very different worlds but there's some overlap, there's this big push towards minimalism.

And you know, I have given it a try. I've tried being a minimalist. But the truth is I'm not a minimalist and I don't think that's a problem. So today I want to talk about some of the pitfalls that I see with minimalism and why it's worth experimenting with embracing maximalism instead.

And even if you feel like you're a vowed minimalist, I want you to listen to this episode because it's always useful to understand why and how we're choosing something and see what results we're getting. So let's start with minimalism and then I'll explain what maximalism is.

I will be totally transparent. I just kind of made that word up. It may exist as a whole movement that I just don't even know about. It's possible. I did not research it because I just want to use it the way that I am using it in this episode. So let's start with minimalism. What is minimalism?

Minimalism actually started as an art movement in post-World War Two America, so it has a term, if there are art historians listening to this. But the way that I'm talking about it, today we use the term to mean kind of anything that is stripped down to the essentials and minimalism as a lifestyle, which again, is a super loose term, can mean anything from a

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simplified aesthetic of no clutter and clean lines, to using literally as little as possible in some area of your life or all areas of your life.

It's not a well-defined term really because it gets used for everything from formal artwork to shampoo packaging and grocery shopping. But in general, it's about refining things down to the simplest form. Not ornate, not flowery. Spare, simple, restrained, minimal, only exactly what you need. Nothing extra.

And minimalism is kind of all the rage these days and I think there are good reasons for that in some ways. We live in a consumerist culture where we're subjected to constant advertising encouraging us to consume our way to happiness. And it's easy to end up living kind of among mountains of things that we don't particularly like or want or need and we're encouraged to shop to deal with our feelings, and most of us don't know how to deal with our feelings, so we accumulate things for that dopamine hit and then we just have them and now they're just everywhere.

So it totally can be valuable to edit our belongings and versions of minimalism that focus on just owning a few high-quality things that you really love to seem like a way of managing that overwhelm. And in addition to that, we're humans in a world we can't control. And exercising control over our physical surroundings or our wardrobe or whatever else can give us a feeling of control.

So I'm not saying no one should be a minimalist or that it's inherently bad to be a minimalist. If it just happens to be your style preference, knock yourself out. I will totally come over to your empty white living room after the pandemic is over and try not to spill anything.

But I think where minimalism can edge into kind of more complex territory is when we don't really appreciate all the context and the implications

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surrounding it. Because minimalism doesn't come out of nowhere. It's not a coincidence I think that it is a principle, often embraced by people who have perfectionistic personalities and a lot of anxiety.

Because when it's taken too far, minimalism can become a set of rules that you try to live by to control the world and feel good enough. I have coached multiple women on anxiety and guilt over "breaking" their minimalist rules or not being a good enough minimalist or having anything extraneous in their lives.

I coached one client of mine after the pandemic started when we were being advised to stock up on groceries because things were kind of crazy, and she did that, but then she had all of this emotional distress and anxiety about having too much food in the house because she was so emotionally attached to the minimalist principles of only ever buying just enough.

And even though having more food around was helpful for her physical safety at the time, it was creating anxiety about breaking the rules. Minimalism can very easily turn into a kind of good/bad, black/white moralistic worldview that you try to use to regulate and manage yourself and discipline yourself into being good enough to be worthy and acceptable.

And in that way, it's very similar to a diet or food restriction or any other kind of restrictive activity where you attempt to maintain and create an illusion of control over the world by severely regulating your own behavior or your own consumption. And I don't think it's an accident that it's so popular in the online influencer and lifestyle community.

Which, before we even get into the kind of political angle, which I'm going to in a minute, let's just pause and notice that teaching people how to be

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minimalist is a big business, which is a little paradoxical. Makes sense though from a marketing perspective.

If you've maxed out on selling people lots of stuff, now it's time to change the rules of the game and you want to teach them to throw out all that stuff and buy new stuff, just buy fewer pieces that are more expensive. So how often do you see the minimalist influencers you follow on Instagram trading out one set of minimalist things for another?

I'm not saying, again, that there's anything wrong with that. It is totally a valid style or even aesthetic, or even in some cases, value-based principle. But you also just want to keep a skeptical or at least logical eye on things. A minimalist influencer's career still depends on advertising or selling something and people buying it.

If you have plastic Tupperware now, is it really better to throw that out into a landfill to buy glass Tupperware? You get to decide, but that's not completely obvious to me. So you just want to kind of always take a step back and keep an eye on what's going on behind the scenes.

But the real core of the issue for me, from my perspective and what I care about teaching you is that minimalism can appeal to us for the same reasons that dieting and restriction and controlling our bodies appeal to us. They're all markers of certain kinds of values. Restraint, smallness, thinness, restriction, rules, purity.

And I think the coaching industry especially can easily get coopted by cultural narratives that emphasize a certain kind of minimalism that is associated with restraint, with restriction, with aestheticism, with self-control.

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If you came to one of the body image webinars I've done recently, you heard me talk about this kind of historical thing that I've been thinking about a lot, which is the ways in which the diet industry in America got its start in women's magazines of the 1830s, which began publishing advice to white women that they should signal their moral superiority to Black women by emphasizing restraint in their diets and maintaining a trim figure.

So in the 1830s, America is in the throes of slavery, we have this huge racist institution that is running the country that requires society constantly be producing ideology to justify it. So that means it's just that if you have an institution like slavery, which is so manifestly and obviously unjust and unfair, and when I say that, of course some people thought it was just or fair, but that's the whole point.

You have something that is obvious in its face that people are being treated differently, and so for the society to kind of maintain that cognitive dissonance, it has to come up with a lot of theories and ideas to justify that inequality, to make it okay morally.

Of course it's not really okay morally in my view, but we're just talking about how does this society operate. When you have that kind of obvious inequality and oppression, then the society has to come up with all of these explanations that try to make it okay, to reduce the cognitive dissonance.

And so the institution of slavery required that American society be constantly producing ideas to justify the enslavement of certain people and the freedom of other people. And one of the powerful ideologies that did that was to attribute moral superiority to white people and moral inferiority to Black people and enslaved people. And associating white people, especially white women, with Christian virtue.

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Talk about cognitive dissonance. These are people who hold themselves out as being religious people, as being Christian, and yet they have slaves. And so that disconnect required these social and cultural stories that white people were more virtuous and Black people and enslaved people were base.

And particularly white women were the most virtuous, and Black women were the least. Had these baser animal instincts in this ideology, in this story. So white women were restrained and virtuous and had self-control. That was the story they were explicitly told to embody through controlling their bodies and their food.

And then that was supposed to show how they were so different from Black women who were coded by the society, who were described by this justification ideology as lazy and gluttonous and sexual. That was the narrative. And we still see those racist tropes impacting our culture today.

So fast forward, minimalism can be used in a way that makes it like an environmental diet. Women are always being encouraged to control ourselves, to restrict ourselves, to make ourselves smaller, to be elegant, which usually means more refined in a kind of classist sense, quieter, conforming to certain ways of looking and being that are about withholding and restraint and control.

And I think it's so interesting that minimalism even gets associated with whiteness visually often. It's like a white room, white furniture, just a few light colors. I understand there is the kind of Scandinavian history of minimalist design. I'm not saying it's a one to one. But I just think all of these kinds of influences and the way they add up are worth thinking about.

I'm obviously not saying that if you prefer minimalist design, it's because of unconscious racism or that minimalism is inherently racist. But I do think we

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should just be skeptical and think about any aesthetic that encourages women to restrict, to restrain, to control, and that moralizes about the inherently value of doing so.

And looking at the historical context, which isn't just this kind of racial context I've described. You can also think about the puritan context, Christian values of restriction and restraint. We should just think about where those influences show up in our current day society, in our current thought patterns.

Because if your decorating or lifestyle or even value principals create guilt and shame when you don't follow them exactly, or make you always feel like you're not doing it well enough and you need to keep changing things or spending money to fix it or trying to do better and better to reach this impossible goal, and that's creating guilt and shame, then I think there's something worth digging into there.

So what is the alternative to minimalism? I'm not advocating indiscriminate consumption and hoarding. That's not the only other option. But I do want to speak up for the joy of maximalism. Personally, I do not want to minimize my life. I do not want to spend my life showing how restrained and controlled I can be. I want to maximize my life.

I don't want to eat only the same three foods every day so that I have a pure routine. I want to eat all the delicious foods that the world's cuisines have come up with. I want to experience variety. I don't want to wear only the same four pieces of neutral-colored clothing for the rest of my life to show how kind of disciplined and elegant I am.

I want to have many pieces of clothing that I love in vibrant colors and fabrics and different shapes and silhouettes. I want to live in a space that has color, that has variety, that looks like it's lived in by a real human who's

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had real experiences and preferences and tastes. Not just a carbon copy of another Swedish design-themed Instagram post.

I want to love many people; I want to have a lot of different experiences. I was talking about this to a friend of mine and he said, “I want to bite life on its big juicy ass,” which is not how I would say it, but that is kind of the sentiment.

Again, I’m not saying that if you simply prefer to wear mostly beige linen, or you just like eating oatmeal every day and feel great about it that there’s anything wrong with that. But we just always I think want to interrogate our preferences. Examine them. Look at them.

Make sure they actually are just true preferences and that they’re not carrying a moral or emotional work for us, that they’re not something that we cling to to make us feel in control or worthy or virtuous or to use against ourselves as a measure of how good we are at restriction and control and restraint.

And when those aesthetics are modeled by mostly thin white women as part of a lifestyle of restraint and self-control, I think that we should be doubly skeptical and curious. There can be peace in simplicity for sure. I don’t feel my best in a cluttered environment either. But there can also be joy in variety and abundance.

To me, maximalism still means I think about what I eat, what I purchase, what I wear, where I live. I care a lot about the aesthetics of those things or the values of those things. I’m still considering and choosing them on purpose. And everything in my environment has a place.

Maximalism is not thoughtless clutter and consumption. It’s not a whole fast fashion wardrobe made by slave labor every year. That’s not what I’m

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talking about. I'm talking about still being thoughtful and choosing what I want to spend my time, my money, on what I want to put into my body, what I want to see in my environment, but I'm not focused on being as small as I can, having as little as I can, being as restrained as I can.

I'm not focused on trying to control my environment in order to manage my emotional life. I base my decisions on what will bring me joy and delight and fulfillment and vibrancy. Maximalism is about taking up space, living life fully, zest and vigor. It's about saturating my life. Not controlling it.

Of course you can go too far in any direction. Maximalism isn't about binging on food or furniture or books or jewelry or sex or anything else. If you feel compulsive in either direction, if you feel compulsive in your restriction or compulsive in your consumption, then you have work to do.

But maximalism is about allowing yourself to have a big appetite for life. Allowing yourself to take up space, which is not something that women are encouraged to do. Physically, we're always being taught to make ourselves smaller. Emotionally, we're always being taught to make ourselves smaller.

Maximalism is about allowing yourself to be bigger, to be colorful and loud, even if it looks messy or chaotic to someone else, if it's in a way that's beautiful to you. Be magnificent. Be abundant. Take up space. Live out loud. Be yourself in all your particular eccentricities and life experiences and values and preferences and aesthetics. Be someone who creates an experience of life that really is yours, even if it doesn't look like what you see on social media.

These are radical things for a woman to do. So before you go back and do an all-white room with all white furniture and no belongings that look like they belong to any particular human, I'm just saying give it a try. Try taking

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up some space and living out loud, my chickens. See how it feels. I'll talk to you next week.

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