

UFYB 154: Ghost Patterns - Anxiety, Fixation & Survival



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. So you may hear crickets in the background of this episode. I'm recording at night and just realizing how loud they are, now that I made everything else quiet so that I could record this.

So today or tonight's episode is going to be short and sweet, but I'm hoping it's really going to blow some of your minds because it kind of blew my mind when I figured this out recently. So y'all know part of the way that I teach is to be really transparent with all of you. I never want to pretend that I have it all figured out or that I'm perfect and you just need to be perfect like me.

And to each their own, but I think when teachers or coaches present themselves that way, as if they are all knowing, or they have it all figured out, or they don't struggle, I think it's misleading and even a little unethical. And it doesn't do their students or the industry any favors because then what they're doing, rather than kind of sharing a solution with you is sort of selling a buy this from me so that you can be perfect like me.

That's really the opposite of what I'm teaching, which is I'm teaching and suggesting that you invest in learning a set of tools that will enable you to navigate life more skillfully and enjoy your life more. But a big part of that is learning to embrace your own imperfection and your own humanness.

It's like the opposite of this will make you perfect. So today I want to share with you something that just really clicked for me in a new way recently.

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

UFYB 154: Ghost Patterns - Anxiety, Fixation & Survival

And it's given me so much relief with one of the crazy parts of my brain. And so I want to share it in the hopes that it's going to help some of you.

And so I went back and forth about what to call this episode because I kind of think of these as ghost thought patterns. Thought patterns that continue to haunt you, even after the actual thought problem has been resolved. But it's also really about anxiety and fixation and why our brains do that. So it's both those things.

So I've talked on the podcast before about how your primitive brain evolved to keep you alive. That's its only goal. Preferably, it would like you to be alive long enough to have babies. That's it. That's all it cares about. And that means that when your primitive brain sees something that it identifies as a threat to your survival, it will become absolutely fixated on that threat.

So when you can't stop worrying about something, it's because your brain sees that thing as a threat, and it's trying to keep it front and center for you so that you can figure out how to resolve it. If you were starving to death in the wild, your brain would make sure you thought about that all the time.

It would not want you to get distracted doing something else and forget to look for food, or if something was chasing you that was going to eat you, it's like, not the time to stop and smell the roses. Your brain would be like, hey, you're going to die, you're going to die, you're going to die, pay attention.

That's what your primitive brain does. To your primitive brain, if a threat has been identified, it really is not going to be able to think about anything else until that threat is neutralized. And kind of side note, this is why I teach that

UFYB 154: Ghost Patterns - Anxiety, Fixation & Survival

anxiety and stress don't generally make you more productive or better at anything, because it's actually tunnel vision.

When you're in that state biologically, you can only think about getting away from danger. So one of the problems we all deal with in modern life is that our primitive brains don't know the difference between a predator that will actually eat you, something that's actually going to kill you, and an email from your boss or a person you went on a date with who isn't texting you back.

Given the way that humans evolved, social ties were crucial to our survival. I talk about this a lot. So social rejection, which your brain sees in your boss being upset that something's late, or people at a party not talking to you, your brain will read any sort of suggestions of social rejection as a threat.

And then your brain fixates on that. It wants to try to neutralize that threat. Your brain sees something as a threat and all it can do then is it wants to neutralize the threat. And this happens in romantic relationships too, and I find it's often the most intense in that context because of the ways that our romantic relationships can be arenas for replaying the way that we formed attachments to our parents or our caregivers as infants, or as children.

So if you grew up with a caregiver who was inconsistent in meeting your needs, and I teach about wants versus needs for adults. As a child, you do have needs, you are dependent on other people to feed you, to take care of you, and for any emotional needs you have as a child.

Like, you are much more living from your primitive brain. Your prefrontal cortex is not fully developed. You are literally dependent on other people

UFYB 154: Ghost Patterns - Anxiety, Fixation & Survival

for your survival. So if you grew up with a caregiver who was inconsistent in meeting those basic needs, or in giving you affection or love, or was worse than that, was abusive, your primitive brain very rightly perceived at the time that your literal survival was at risk.

And in some cases, it may have been your literal survival that was at risk, and even when that wasn't 100% the case, as a child, again, you're still operating much more from that primitive brain. You're much more reliant on your caregiver.

So even if your literal physical survival wasn't at stake, it's still a very heightened relationship and a very heightened intensity for your primitive brain if sort of love and affection are inconsistent, if you have an emotionally volatile parent or caregiver, so that you are in fear sometimes about whether they are going to take care of you or whether you're going to be rejected by them, which your brain sees as a big dangerous threat, especially as a child.

If you had any of these kinds of experiences, you learned to hyper-fixate on any indication that your caregivers were upset with you or were going to withdraw their approval or their love or their affection. Anything that you either needed for physical support to actually stay alive, or that really triggered the part of your brain that sees rejection, especially by someone who needs to keep you alive, sees emotional rejection from that person as being a threat to survival. That in that part of your brain, it sees that as easily leading to something that would impact your physical survival.

So your brain saw those experiences as threats to your survival. It was not always wrong and even when it was wrong, it's much more understandable why it was operating that way and it's much closer to reality when you're a child and you are dependent on your caregivers.

UFYB 154: Ghost Patterns - Anxiety, Fixation & Survival

And so your brain focused on neutralizing that threat however it could. Now of course, we can't ever control other people, whether we're a child or an adult, but as a child, if that's your experience, you will come up with various strategies to try to neutralize the threat, to try to get the attention, if it's being withheld, to try to get the resources you think you need, to try to get someone to not be mad at you if you think they're mad at you.

Or sometimes, you don't have any effect on it, but it feels better for your brain to believe that you could. We all would prefer to believe in our unmanaged minds that we can control other people's behavior. That feels less scary to us.

So whether you actually were able to impact the person's behavior or you just wanted to believe that you could, you developed this belief, this subconscious belief that you could neutralize the threat by trying to control the person or respond in a certain way or get a certain kind of validation or reconnect with them or whatever kind of behaviors you were trying to do.

So fast forward, you're now an adult. You are not physically dependent on your parents or your boss or your romantic partner or your friends for your literal survival. But your primitive brain does not know that. Your brain still sees potential rejection or displeasure or disruption in the consistency of attention as a primal threat to your survival.

And so what does your brain want to do? It wants to neutralize the threat. Okay, so this so far is kind of - I've taught this before, and I already understood this. Going into my recent little revelation. But here's what I understand on a deeper level now that really clicked for me.

UFYB 154: Ghost Patterns - Anxiety, Fixation & Survival

This explains why my brain still sometimes fixates on something that I truly not, now just intellectually, but emotionally understand doesn't matter. So let me explain what I mean. Before I found thought work, and this is where a lot of you are now, or you're just starting out, I actually believed that whether someone at my job was upset with me, or some random dude I had been dating was fading out, or a person in a store incorrectly thought I cut the line and was mad at me, I really thought those things mattered.

At the beginning of learning to manage your mind, when you're still deep in people pleasing and don't have your self-worth figured out and are using other people as validation vending machines, you actually - it's not just your primitive brain that's working this way. You actually legitimately believe consciously that these people's opinions of you or what they're doing matters and impacts you and is emotionally or physically dangerous to you.

At that stage of my process, I still believed that there was something wrong with me, and so I was constantly trying to prove that wasn't true by making sure that everyone liked and approved of me. So if you truly believe that you aren't good enough to deserve your job, then of course you'd fixate on what your boss thinks of you. It's not a confusing misfire. It totally makes sense.

If your thought is, I'm not good enough for my job, I'm going to be fired, then of course you're going to fixate on what your boss thinks of you. If you think there's something wrong with you when it comes to dating and romantic relationships, then of course you're going to fixate on whatever some random person you've been on two dates with thinks of you.

In those scenarios, your self-esteem is actually riding on your thoughts about the person's behavior. So it makes sense that you'd be obsessed with it. What I have been digging into and working through this past year

UFYB 154: Ghost Patterns - Anxiety, Fixation & Survival

has been what happens when you actually have resolved those underlying thought patterns.

So you do believe that you are amazing at your job, you do believe that you are an incredible partner and a great catch. You no longer actually believe that there's anything wrong with you. And yet, your brain sometimes will still fixate or get hypervigilant about the same shit it did before, even though you don't believe any longer those negative thoughts about yourself.

So I've described it before as feeling like the ghost of a pattern or like a brain habit. It's like if you bite your fingernails because you're anxious and you get rid of your anxiety, you may still have the habit of biting your nails. That's what it sort of felt like.

So you might truly believe you're amazing at your job, and yet your brain completely freaks out if your boss seems short, or you truly believe you're worthy of love, and yet your brain gets fixated thinking about somebody you went on one date with, even though you actually at the same time 100% believe you'll absolutely be fine if it doesn't work out.

So what I think is going on is that your brain has developed the habit of scanning for threats and then when it finds what it thinks is a threat, based on your old patterning, it just engages its old program of trying to neutralize the threat.

So number one, there's no real threat. That's always the case in these scenarios. When you believe that you're not good enough for your job and so you're freaked out about your boss, there isn't really a threat to your survival there, but your brain thinks there is.

UFYB 154: Ghost Patterns - Anxiety, Fixation & Survival

But at the second level of awareness, not only is there no real threat, but you truly understand and believe there is no real threat. You believe you're amazing at your job. You understand it doesn't matter if your boss doesn't think that because you totally believe that you can find another job, or you can start your own thing.

You are not actually concerned. And yet some part of your brain is still fixating and ruminating. It's because your brain has labeled whatever you're thinking about or worrying about as a threat to your survival, and so your brain's only job it thinks is to neutralize that threat.

So it's like an old habit. It's like an old program running. Even though you've dealt with your self-worth stuff, you've dealt with your self-esteem stuff, you've dealt with all of the thoughts originally that were the reason that your brain was constantly scanning for this, it's like that part of your brain updated and it forgot to tell the scanning part of your brain, which is this very primitive part that is so old and so used to doing this pattern of scanning for threats and then fixating on them.

So it's almost like it makes me think about - it's like if there was an old machine somewhere, like an old Cold War machine that was scanning for nuke threats from the Russians. And that's been resolved, it's no longer an issue, but somebody forgot to turn off the machine. And so it's still scanning, and if it sees anything that it thinks might be that, it sets off the alarm.

And when that happens, your brain wants to constantly remind you about the threat, it wants to take action. So it's like you feel very agitated, you want to email your boss preemptively to apologize, you want to text a coworker, you want to call the person you're dating. You want to neutralize the threat it perceives.

UFYB 154: Ghost Patterns - Anxiety, Fixation & Survival

So for me, understanding that my brain has a habit of identifying something as a threat, even when I no longer believe it's a threat on any level and I truly don't, has helped me relate to my brain in these situations so much better because I found it very confusing before I understood this.

And I'm a human, so I started thinking there was something wrong with me or my brain. I was never going to get over this experience. But when I slowed down and got curious, I was able to see nothing is wrong. This hypervigilance doesn't mean that I haven't made the progress I thought. It doesn't mean that I secretly still don't think I'm good enough.

It doesn't mean that I secretly believe my worth is at stake in this interaction. It's literally just a habit of scanning for threats, identifying threats, and then fixating on neutralizing the threat. It's happening subconsciously at an automatic level.

And it would feel so insane because I truly didn't think this thing mattered, whatever it was, my brain would not stop thinking about it. I would be distracted from whatever else was going on. I literally felt kind of out of my mind when this would happen. And it made me feel so stuck, like I couldn't get to the other side. Whatever area of my life it was happening in was just always going to be like this.

Because it seemed like, listen, I resolved the problem, I've resolved the self-worth issue, whatever it is, and yet this is still happening. But once I realize this is just a mistaken diagnosis of a survival threat, it's just my brain is scanning, scanning, scanning, because it learned to do that a long time ago, and it will find what it's looking for, so it finds a threat, once I realized that was just motivating my brain to try to neutralize the threat, I was able to finally come up with a though redirect that helps.

UFYB 154: Ghost Patterns - Anxiety, Fixation & Survival

So now when I find my brain doing that, I just practice thinking, “This has nothing to do with my survival. My survival is not at risk here. This email, this text, this person, this disagreement, whatever it is, has nothing to do with my survival.” Talking in survival is terms that my primitive brain can understand.

And I’ve been practicing these thoughts when I’m not in that state as well, just reminding myself consistently that emails or texts or disagreements or whatever thing you’re working on has nothing to do with my survival. So I’m training my brain to not make this mistake as much in the future, to not scan for threats as much, to not misdiagnose things as threats so much, and to not fixate so much when it does based on my old patterns or my old experiences.

And this has completely transformed my relationship with these episodes. They haven’t completely stopped yet, but if you’ve been doing thought work for a while, you know that it’s completely different to feel like your brain is acting in an irrational way you can’t understand, versus how it feels when you understand why your brain is doing what it’s doing.

Even if you can’t change it yet, just understanding and not resisting it, and understanding the why of what’s going on I think really helps you get perspective and not feel so immersed in the experience. So that is what I recommend you try next time that you are fixating on something.

Look at what your brain is doing, see if it might be identifying a threat it’s trying to neutralize, especially if you can see that it’s related to an old pattern or a childhood experience or whatever. And then remind it that your survival’s not at stake. It does not need to neutralize the threat because there is no threat.

UFYB 154: Ghost Patterns - Anxiety, Fixation & Survival

You are not in danger and this thing, it's not related to your survival, it doesn't impact your survival. You are safe, there's nothing to neutralize. So I hope that this technique is as helpful for you as it has been for me. It has been a real game-changer for me, and I think it's going to be really helpful for many of you. Have a beautiful week, my chickens. I'll talk to you soon.

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