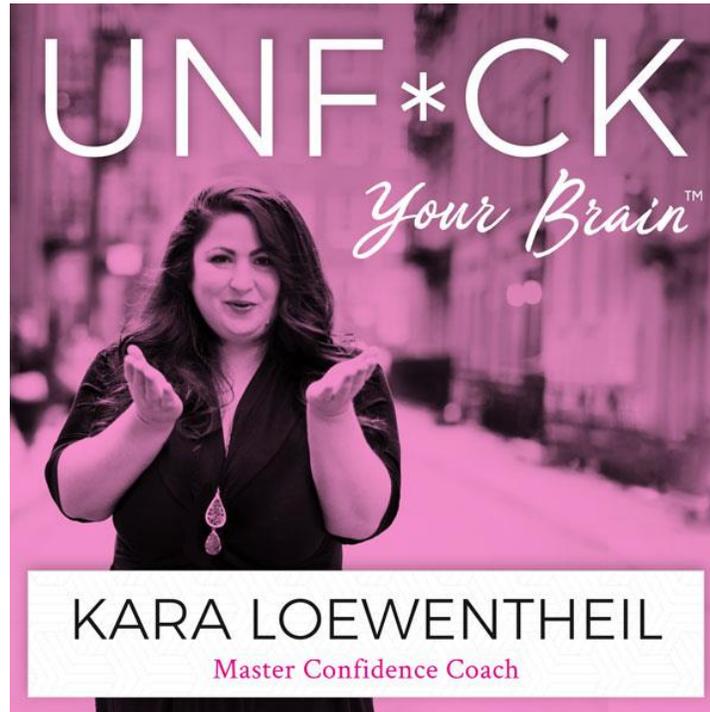


# UFYB 156: Victim Blaming & Self-Shaming



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## UFYB 156: Victim Blaming & Self-Shaming

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 awesome, but my head is spinning a little bit. I've been apartment hunting the last couple of weeks here in New York because I decided now that I run a business with employees, and I have to stay home 24/7 because it's a pandemic, and I thankfully live in one of the jurisdictions that is actually trying to handle it correctly, it might be nice to have an apartment where my desk is not the main item in my living room.

So I think those of y'all who don't live in New York, Paris, Hong Kong, or Tokyo, or maybe San Francisco also probably don't really understand how small New York City apartments are. I think my entire apartment right now is about the size of a master bedroom and bath in a new build suburban home.

So it's been super fun, but it's been such an interesting process because of all the thoughts it brings up around money and value and even identity. And I think apartment hunting or house shopping or whatever you do is like trying on all these different identities and different lives that you might have.

And it's such an interesting example of what I teach about how once you clear out your unmanaged thoughts, you actually will know what you want. It's really common that my students learn the basics of thought work and they're so used to basing their preferences on running away from things that they think will make them unhappy, or towards what they think will make them happy.

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And then they're very confused when we sort of start to take away that kind of motivation. They don't know, they haven't experienced what it's like to want or prefer something without believing that you need it to stop feeling bad or start feeling good. So then they think that if they aren't running away from negative emotion or towards positive emotion, they won't care about or like anything more than anything else.

So they think they'll have no idea how to make decisions. And it can feel weird and even a little numb at first to not be propelled by panic or desperation to feel better. But what I always tell them is that when all of that settles down and clears out from doing your thought work, you still have your personality and your preferences.

And this apartment hunting has been a perfect example. I looked at 20 lovely apartments, and I could have been happy and could be happy in any one of those apartments because happiness comes from my thoughts. Not even the best bathtub in the world, which y'all know I'm obsessed with, good bathtubs cause my happiness.

And there were things I could choose to love about all those apartments and be happy about it. But there still was one that just felt like I liked it more. It just felt more like a fit for me. It felt like where I wanted to be.

It wasn't rational in the sense that there's no objective rational proof system for why one apartment is better than another. There's no right decision. It just entirely depends on what your preferences are and what matters to you in terms of size or layout or location or appearance or history or neighborhood or whatever else.

And it wasn't driven by anxiety or dread. My current living place is fine, all the options were fine. I didn't have to run away from one of the options.

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And it wasn't driven by a fantasy that if I just lived in this place, I'd be happy forever and never have negative emotion.

And it actually didn't even meet some of the criteria I decided on when I started looking. Like the bathtub is actually not amazing. And because it's in Manhattan, it is definitely not the most I can get for my money because you can get more for your money in literally anywhere else than Manhattan, including just over the river in Brooklyn. But I still knew that I liked it the best and I wanted to live there. Just felt like me.

So listen, that's a thought, right? It's two levels of thoughts. I'm having one set of thoughts that produce the emotional experience of it feeling like me, and then I have a thought describing whatever that experience is as the feeling of just feeling like me, just feeling at home, it just seeming like the right one for me.

There's whatever thoughts produce that experience, and then there's my thought I have where I describe that experience as feeling like me. The apartment feels like me. But that's fine. I'm not trying to change any of that. We will always have thoughts. We are not trying to get to thought zero. It's not like inbox zero. We're not trying to empty our minds.

I like the thoughts that make me feel good about this apartment and I don't have any compelling reason to change them. It's available, I can afford to live there, they seem to want to let me live there. There's no reason for me to change those thoughts. It's a win-win.

But of course I could change those thoughts if they rejected my rental application or something. I would totally have changed my thoughts to just love a different apartment because that's to my benefit. The point of this long tangent - it's not really a tangent because it has a point - is that when you remove the desperation or the desire for something outside of yourself

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to make you happy, we'll still have preferences and opinions and tastes and still be you.

And that's fine. We're not trying to get rid of that. It's just not going to feel so desperate or so kind of fantasy-based. And it's not going to feel like you have to get what you want or get away from what you're trying to get away from in order to be happy. It's not going to feel like the rest of the world has to cooperate in a certain way.

So your happiness just doesn't feel as fragile and conditional. But it doesn't mean that you become a zombie and a robot who has no preferences. So anyway, that could totally be its own podcast and I think it is. I have an episode on how to know what you want.

So if you listen to this and you haven't listened to that episode, and this is something you've been wondering about, then you should go listen to that episode at a later date. But you should keep listening to this episode now because there's really no segue, but this episode is important.

So we're just going to switch. Keep up, chickens. We're just going to go right into it. Before I really get into the meat of this episode, I just want to issue a little warning. This is a very advanced topic. So if you're new to the podcast, I don't want you to start with this topic. I don't want you to start with this episode.

If you have listened to everything that came before and you have been practicing your thought work, especially if you're in The Clutch and you've been getting coaching and help, so you really know what you're doing, then this is a great episode for you.

At the very least, if you're going to listen to this episode, I want you to make sure that you've listened to episode 116 called Forgiveness and Blame.

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Because in that episode, I introduce the concept of shame versus blame, and how our brain kind of uses those two different emotions and concepts.

And so that's kind of required reading to really get this episode on a deeper level. It's not going to hurt you to listen to it if you haven't heard 116 or if you aren't experienced in thought work, but you're probably going to not really get it. It might seem confusing, or you're not going to really understand the concepts that I'm teaching, and you may misunderstand them.

So that's the R rating, except there's no R rating. I curse on this podcast all the time. It always has an explicit rating. But that's the advanced teaching warning for this episode. So this episode is super important, despite my six-minute preamble about apartment hunting and preferences and how they exist.

So I like to include those sometimes so those of you with too much time on your hands can send me emails about how I shouldn't talk about my life on the podcast, which I really find hilarious. It's my podcast. I'm going to talk about my life if I want. You totally don't have to listen.

Alright, let's get down to business. Victim blaming and self-shaming is the name of this episode. This is very important, you guys. These are related and crucial, so let's get into this.

One of the things I see happening when people start to learn about thought work and learn that our thoughts create our feelings and learn that we have a lot more control over our lives than we think we do is that they start to get worried that this will lead to victim blaming. That's the phrase.

So for instance, I will hear that if someone experiences trauma in their childhood and then has a bunch of resulting thoughts and emotions that are

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painful or disruptive, that teaching them that their current thoughts have something to do with their experience is blaming them for this problem.

So this is something that comes up from critics of thought work, it comes up from students of mine who are totally I think in a good way reckoning with the tools and trying to understand them and feel concerned about this and worry that this is what's happening.

So the most crude example of this would be saying something like, "So you're saying that thought work means if someone's upset about being physically assaulted or raped or sexually assaulted, it's just their fault because of their thoughts and they should just change those thoughts, and then they'd feel fine."

So this, my friends, my chickadees, is not at all what I'm saying. It has never been what I'm saying. But it is a place that a lot of people, especially social justice devotees, jump to in their minds. And so I really want to take this episode to deconstruct where this chain of reasoning is going wrong so that we can understand why it's not accurate.

I think it's such a fascinating reaction because the concept of blame involves an assumption that something has gone wrong. And moreover, that someone did something wrong to make that thing go wrong. So I'm going to explain this all, but it involves an assumption that something's gone wrong, and that someone did something wrong to make that thing go wrong.

So if someone says, "Teaching people that they can change their current experience," which is their current emotional state, "that was created or shaped by past trauma is victim blaming," then they're unconsciously assuming two things, two premises that they don't even know, but that's the unconscious logical premise under what they're saying.

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They're assuming that number one, I'm saying that there's something wrong with the person's current experience. And that number two, that if they don't fix it, that's wrong or bad of them. So let's go through each of those assumptions.

The first one is the assumption that there's something wrong or bad about the person's experience. This sounds unremarkable because we do think of trauma as bad. But trauma isn't inherently one thing or another. The idea of trauma, how we define it, how we categorize it, how we diagnose it, that's all a collection of human thoughts.

I'm not saying it's not a useful collection, and I'm not saying we shouldn't use it. I'm just always reminding you that all of what we're ever talking about are human thoughts. Human language describing and categorizing something that we observe in the world.

So is trauma bad? We get to decide if we want to think that. We can think anything we want about it. We can totally choose to think what most of us think unconsciously, which is that trauma is terrible and horrible and should never happen.

The only problem with thinking that is that it does happen. And so we're resisting reality, which always adds to our suffering. We could also think that it is a brilliant evolutionary adaptation that allows people to survive shocking physical or emotional experiences, and that like many adaptations, it is well suited to the job that it performs in the moment, and then it has consequences afterwards that we aren't as big a fan of, or that aren't as helpful.

We could also just choose to think it's neither good or bad. It's just a thing that exists. And that's three of probably 6000 thoughts we could have about trauma. I'm not telling you what my thought about it is or that there's a right

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thought. I'm just showing you that when we say, "So you're blaming someone for their trauma," we're assuming that the trauma response is bad and should not have happened and is inherently wrong or a problem.

And I think we think that we're standing up for people who have experienced trauma by doing that. But the problem is that that belief and assumption can be actually damaging in and of itself. When we reinforce the idea that trauma is bad and trauma is wrong, and if you're experiencing effects of trauma, something terrible is happening to you and something has gone terribly wrong, what message are we sending people who have experienced and continue to experience the aftereffects of trauma?

I think we think this is empowering and empathetic, that we're showing people we care about their suffering, we're on their side. But we always need to look at how the thought operates in the human brain and what results we get.

For some people, that thought may be liberating and freeing. If you're blaming yourself for your trauma response, it does feel better to blame someone else. But for some people, this thought is going to feel terrible because telling them that something has gone wrong and that their brain is fucked up now and that every time they experience any post-trauma symptom, it's a sign of how fucked up and wrong everything is, that thought may actually not be helpful.

Because the reality is, they are now experiencing whatever thoughts and feelings or neurological patterns or whatever's happening are a result of that trauma. And every time we reinforce that that means something horrible went wrong and a terrible thing is happening to them in having these symptoms, we're telling them that their current experience is terrible and wrong and bad and a problem.

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And the human brain, as we talk about on this podcast all the time, does not respond well when it is told that its current reality is wrong and bad and a problem. One of the things I always do when I'm working on thought work with someone who has had trauma, in addition to any trauma specific therapy they're getting, which I always recommend, is I have them work on their thoughts about their post-trauma symptoms and experience.

Because there's so much judging of ourselves, our own response, shaming of ourselves for having symptoms, projecting out about having them in the future, giving them power over what kind of life you can have. There's so much going on in our thinking about the fact, the circumstance that we had a traumatic experience and now have some post-trauma symptoms of some kind that we're dealing with.

There's so much drama about that and the way we think about that. So number one, having an assumption that trauma is wrong or bad sounds totally common sense, but I don't accept that it's necessarily a useful thought.

All of human life involves suffering. Suffering is a part of life. That doesn't mean that people's trauma and suffering doesn't matter or that we don't want to make the world a safer place for people. But I don't find it useful to emotionally resist the truth that there is suffering in the world and in every human life.

Trauma exists because the brain developed it. We can believe that it shouldn't exist, but is that thought serving us? Maybe it should exist. Maybe it's useful in some ways to protect someone in an overwhelming moment, and then not as useful afterwards. Or maybe it's useful with some consequences that are not as useful.

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There's a lot of ways to think about trauma and thinking it's terrible and wrong and shouldn't exist and it doesn't matter, or it doesn't matter who cares about trauma are not our only options. It's not so black and white.

And when we talk about sort of victim blaming and worry about that, we have to make sure we're being clear with ourselves that the idea that thought work is blaming people for their negative experiences implies that their experience is negative, there's something wrong with it, that it shouldn't be happening.

And that sounds like we are being empathetic and caring, but when you tell someone that their experience is wrong and bad and shouldn't be happening, that almost always only increases their suffering. So that's the first assumption of the victim blaming misreading of thought work is that trauma existing or post-trauma responses existing are bad or wrong or shouldn't exist or are fucked up.

And that thinking about them that way and sort of accepting the premise that when you have those responses something has gone wrong and something is now bad and your life is now worse, the assumption that is sort of accepting that premise is helpful, I think we really have to question.

The second kind of implied premise is that we are now saying that if a person is having those experiences, whatever it is, those negative emotions, anything on a range from negative emotion to clinical PTSD, there's a lot of stuff in between there, that if the person's having those experiences, that what we're saying with thought work is it's that person's fault, as if there's any blame involved.

But again, that assumes that the fact that the person is having a negative emotion or even a post-traumatic response is inherently bad or wrong. We only have to blame someone when something is wrong. We only have to

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blame someone if we think something has gone wrong or is bad or shouldn't happen.

So if you think that when you say that thought work is victim blaming, what you're saying is that someone, like me or another teacher or just the concept of thought work is blaming the person having the negative emotions, as if we think that it's wrong and bad that they're having negative emotions and it's her fault for having them.

But the emotions that someone experiences are never bad or wrong. They're not a problem. Negative thoughts and emotions are a part of life for everyone, whether about a traumatic event or whether they originate in a trauma response or not.

It's only blaming if you think that what I'm teaching is that someone should not have negative thoughts or feelings or is wrong or bad for having them, or the thoughts and feelings are wrong and bad in and of themselves. If we remove that, if there's nothing wrong with having a negative emotion, if it's not inherently wrong, bad, or fucked up to have negative emotions or a post-traumatic response, if we aren't judging that experience then there's no blame to be allotted.

I think what happens when people misunderstand thought work in this way is that they're still evaluating people's thoughts and feelings and actions and results as good or bad. And so if the thoughts or feelings or actions or results are bad or not good enough or not where the person wants them to be or whatever else, and it's because of thoughts or feelings stemming from trauma, that if we show the person the way their thoughts create their results, that means we are blaming them.

But there's no blame because all of that shit is neutral. Thought work is not about labeling and judging thoughts or feelings or actions or results as

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good or bad. Thoughts and feelings and actions and results simply exist. They're not good or bad. Even if you have a goal that you aren't achieving, even if you have negative thoughts that you aren't changing or can't change.

It doesn't matter. That's not bad. That's not wrong. Thought work is not about having any qualitative or moral evaluation. It's descriptive. It teaches us what is creating the results in our life and what we would need to do to change it. It doesn't make any judgment about what kind of results we're getting, what kind of thoughts we're thinking.

It doesn't make it a problem if it's one set of thoughts and results versus another set of thoughts and results. If you say you want to start a yoga habit and then you don't do that, that's neutral. That only has meaning that you give it with your mind.

Whether someone doesn't start the habit because of a trauma response or because of a non-trauma related thought, equally neutral. Not good or bad. It's not their fault in the sense that there's no blame involved. Nobody has done anything bad or wrong that they need to be blamed for.

It's a question of causation. Not of evaluation. We just look at your thoughts to see what's causing your results. But your results are not good or bad. They just are. They just exist. It's just a math problem. Thought work is just showing us what are the pieces of the equation. It's not evaluating it.

It's so fascinating because a trauma response or PTSD happen in the neurological system. It happens in your nervous system and your mind, so saying that someone's trauma response or PTSD prevents them from doing a certain thing in their lives or feeling a certain way is not that different from saying it's their thoughts.

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The difference just has to do with people's different ideas of how much capacity you have to change those thoughts or that response using coaching tools over time, which sounds a lot less dramatic than victim blaming, right? That's really the disagreement.

Can you change a thought versus can you change a trauma response if they're different? How much can you change it? How long would it take? And what tools would help you change it? That's really what it's about. That's all that's going on.

And what's of course true on the weirder deeper level is that all of our different opinions about all of this shit is all just optional human thoughts that we can choose to believe or not. The thing I really want you to take away from this is that even if you cannot change a given thought or reaction pattern or neurological pattern or whatever you want to call these different systems, even if you can't change it much or you can't change it at all, there's still no blame involved.

Because it isn't bad or wrong to not change it. You really have to grasp how radical thought work is in this respect. I'm not saying everyone teaches it this way, but this is the way that I teach it. Everything is neutral. All of the meaning we have in the world is made up of human thoughts by human minds.

I'm not teaching you can control your thoughts and some thoughts are good and some thoughts are bad and getting the results you want in life makes you good and not getting them makes you bad. So if you can't change your thoughts to get a certain result, you're bad.

That is not what I'm teaching. That's what a lot of you are thinking and some of you may be hearing. That's not what I'm teaching. That would be blaming. If that was what I was teaching then I would be saying it's bad to

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not get the results you want, it's bad to not be able to change your thoughts, it's your fault because something's gone wrong because it's bad.

That's not what I'm teaching. I'm teaching you what I understand to be the math, which is not - it's like saying the math is non-political. The math is non-evaluative. It's just the mechanism. Thoughts create feelings, create actions, create results. That's it.

No one will ever have a fully managed mind 100%, whether they've experienced trauma or not. That's not the goal. And none of your thoughts or feelings or actions or results are good or bad inherently. They're just equations. It's just a math problem. You decide what to make them mean.

I think this misunderstanding of thought work comes about because we think the only alternative to blaming someone else is to shame ourselves. I talk about this on the blame versus shame podcast. We think either I'm wrong and bad, or the world or that other person or these circumstances are wrong and bad.

We think our only options are feel ashamed or feel helpless and victimized. If we blame ourselves then we feel ashamed, if we blame something outside of us, we feel helpless. And if we've chosen to blame someone else or the world outside of us, then we think that when someone suggests that actually we have some power over our own reaction, that means if that's true, then we have to blame ourselves.

We think these are our only two options. I don't want to blame someone else; I blame these other people or the world. I feel bad, I feel helpless. Then someone tells me, hey, you're feeling so helpless and bad, we actually could change that, you don't have to feel that way, and we think what they're saying is well, if you're not going to blame the other people, you have to blame yourself. Now you have to feel ashamed.

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That's not what our only other option is. You don't have to agree to shame or blame as the only options. Thought work is the hidden escape door from that track. And I would say that the people who are most concerned that thought work is victim blaming secretly have the most intense kind of blame/shame game going on subconsciously themselves.

Thought work is not about blaming or shaming anyone, including yourself. And anyone who tells you that it is is missing the point. Have a beautiful week, my chickens, without blaming anyone else or shaming yourself. I'll talk to you next week.

If this episode spoke to you, then you need to check out The Clutch because it comes with a five-week self-coaching course that will walk you through exactly how to apply this life-changing work to anything you experience. Literally anything. If you've ever thought, "Well, I don't know how to get started with thought work or I don't know exactly how to do thought work or if I'm doing it right, or what order I should do it in or how I should do it," the self-coaching course teaches you all of that.

And even if you're familiar with thought work concepts, The Clutch will help you take the work deeper, and it comes with access to expert coaches who can answer any thought work question you have. Plus, me, of course, to coach you live. No question is off limits. You can change your life by going to [unfuckyourbrainn.com/theclutch](http://unfuckyourbrainn.com/theclutch), or you can actually just text your email address to 347-934-8861 and we will send a link to all the information you need straight to your cellphone. I'll see you there.