

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)



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 we doing? Are we doing okay? The US presidential house, some senate elections are coming up very soon, along with various other state races. And I've noticed in every meeting I've been in this week, whoever I'm meeting with is very stressed out about the elections, including people like my Facebook funnel consultant, who's a Canadian who lives in Canada.

She doesn't live here or vote here. And so many people are cycling between anxiety and optimism or hope and despair. I think there's a lot of election residual trauma from 2016 and people are really sort of terrified of potential outcomes and afraid to be hopeful or embrace in the optimism because they think that's going to jinx it or set them up to feel worse down the line.

So I wanted to record this bonus episode to revisit some of what I teach about anxiety and calm and hope and despair and how we deal with it when the world is not doing what we want it to, or we're worried that we it won't do what we want it to.

So depending on when you're listening to this, there are a few different scenarios that could be playing out. I mean, let's be real. If 2020 has taught us anything, it's that we're terrible at predicting the future, so there are probably 600 million scenarios that could be playing out. I'm only naming three.

It's possible that the candidate you wanted to win has won and that's that, in which case, yay, although you still may want to listen to this episode

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

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)

because it really applies to things other than elections. It's possible the candidate you wanted to win has lost and that's that and you feel ugh and terrible and scared and depressed, then you should definitely listen to this.

And it's possible the election hasn't happened yet or it's happened and the winner isn't clear yet, in which case you are in uncertainty, which is a double ugh for your brain, regardless of which way you go. So in that case also, definitely listen to this.

And you'll notice I'm not naming candidates. Now, that's not because I'm hiding my positions. My politics are a 0% secret on this podcast. But brains are brains regardless. And this episode is not just about this one upcoming election. It's about any kind of big uncertainty in your future or any election.

I mean, for all I know, you listening don't care about the presidential election, but you're really fixated on a race for the school board in your district. So this podcast applies and is relevant for anything you're fearing in the future, especially something that is sort of very out of your control, and certainly applies to any kind of election. Not just the upcoming November 3rd, 2020 one.

So the first thing to understand about anxiety about an election outcome or any future outcome is that we are confused about what we're afraid about. We are not actually afraid of the circumstance that may happen. Who occupies the presidency in America is a neutral circumstance, meaning that human brains look at the same fact of who is president and have very different thoughts about it.

That's all we mean when we say neutral circumstance. Doesn't mean I think you should feel neutral about it. That's not what it means. It means it's a thing in the world, a fact in the world that a human mind creates meaning

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)

about, and we know that because human minds have created very different meaning about this for the last four years.

We see that all around us. Human brains in this country have very different thoughts about the president or people in any other elective office. And no matter who has ever held any office, humans have had very different thoughts about them.

If you've ever been involved in local politics, you know people can have vociferous opinions about the smallest town political position too. So when we are afraid of a future circumstance, it's not actually the circumstance that we fear. Our fear is based on what we are making a potential circumstance mean in our minds.

We think about a certain person being elected and we feel anxiety or fear because we have a story about what that will mean for us or for the country, or for someone we care about, or for the institution of democracy or whatever it is that we have identified as being at risk in our minds.

So the first step is always to locate and identify what that meaning is that you are creating with your mind. What are the sentences in your mind about what will happen if a certain person is in office versus a different person?

Fundamentally, when you have a human brain, if you tell yourself something bad may happen in the future, you will fixate on it until it happens. I am aware of no workaround for this. If you had the kind of brain that could just shrug a thought off, then you would not be here listening and if I had that kind of brain, I would not be recording this.

Most human brains react to the threat of danger by fixating on the danger until it has passed. But even when you're thinking that there's a physical or

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)

economic or other concrete danger in the future, that's still not what you're actually afraid of. What you're actually afraid of is how you are going to feel in the future, the negative emotion that you anticipate having if something happens.

Circumstances don't cause our feelings. Even circumstances that everyone around us agrees are bad. Losing a job doesn't cause our feelings, losing a loved one doesn't cause our feelings, losing an election doesn't cause our feelings, even if we're the person who lost the election.

Physical illness or danger doesn't cause our feelings. It is always our thoughts about these things that cause our feelings. The world is full of people who react to the same circumstance however "trivial" it is, or however "serious" it is in very different ways because their thoughts about the circumstance are different.

There are people who get a stage three cancer diagnosis and take that in stride with equanimity, and there are people who have intense fear and anxiety and panic attacks about finding out that they have a few pre-cancerous cells.

I'm not saying one's better or worse. One person isn't a better person or more moral or more evolved or anything else. It's just that two different people and two different brains have two different sets of thoughts that cause two different emotions. Not the circumstance.

I always feel like I have to say every time, I'm not telling you not to have any thoughts or feelings. I'm not telling you that you should feel any particular way. Not saying you should feel terrified, I'm not saying you should feel happy, I'm not saying you should feel neutral.

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)

It's always up to you how you want to feel, but it's important to know that you're the one causing the feelings you're having with your thoughts. Because of this irony that the thing you're most scared of is actually how you will feel in the future, and that's not created by the circumstance. It's created by your thoughts.

You're fearing what your unmanaged mind you predict will make you feel. Ironically, that means you're doing it now already. When you imagine the future circumstance, you imagine what you'll think, and then you have that feeling. You're afraid of that feeling. But you're already having that feeling now because imagining a thought you'll think in the future is the same as thinking it now as far as your brain's concerned.

So on top of that, there's also in this scenario, often uncertainty about the future and that's something your brain hates as well. So for instance, we're currently living in a reality with a certain president when I'm recording this, October 2020.

One of the options ahead of us is that this president will continue to be the president. That's actually not a change in circumstances. That's the circumstance staying the same. But because we've introduced uncertainty as to whether it'll happen or not, that dials up the intensity for our brains seeking danger and freaking out.

So our fear is always about what we think now, what we predict now we will think and feel in the future. The future does not exist. We do not actually have any idea what's going to happen. If we have not learned that from 2020, we may never learn it.

But in the current moment, our fear and anxiety and dread are all because we are mentally believing that we do know what will happen, and that we

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)

will not be able to manage our minds if it does. We are imagining that if this thing happens in the future, I will feel a way I don't want to feel.

The part of your brain that manufactures fear is not the same part that understands political theory and reads spreadsheets. The part that creates fear is a very primitive part of your brain. It's just afraid that it will feel scared because it associates that with physical danger.

Future anxiety is fear that you are going to feel scared in the future, so you get scared now. This is what I was saying about that irony before. You anticipate that you'll feel depressed, so you get depressed now.

So I think I've told this story on the podcast before, but it's really instructive for this exact scenario, so I'm going to tell it again. When Trump won the election in 2016, I momentarily, like many people, lost my mind. I had all this anxiety, and I was a little bit perplexed because I was already a coach.

I was in the middle of my master coach certification, really had done a lot of work on my anxiety and fear about the future, but this was sort of - felt out of my control. Of course it was not. I just didn't understand it yet.

So here's what it turned out was going on in my brain. If you can remember 2016, which was eight million years ago, Steve Bannon was very close to Trump and he was kind of characterized or outed as being anti-Semitic, and there was talk about kind of white nationalism and Nazis in the White House.

So I am Jewish obviously. I don't know about obviously, but I talk about it on the podcast all the time. And I was raised with a lot of kind of residual Holocaust trauma. When and where I was growing up at least or the way I was raised, Jewish kids were taught about the Holocaust very young.

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)

And it's kind of terrifying for small brains that don't understand what's going on. So I had Holocaust dreams for my whole life until probably a few years ago when I really worked through this. And I'm not sort of blaming anyone for this. This is how trauma gets passed down through generations.

But anyone - obviously many people have gone through experiences like this. Many people are raised in cultures or families where there is a legacy of genocide or a legacy of violence. And so I think a lot of us can identify with this. Becomes this kind of omnipresent thing in your mind, especially if you're taught about it young when you can't really process it and don't know how to make sense of it.

And so what I realized was that when Trump was elected, this Holocaust anxiety got real wakened by his election and this idea that there were Nazi sympathizers in power. This was kind of waking up that thought pattern. And in this very specific way, I became really fixated on this very specific fear that I was not going to know when I should leave.

So one of the things I heard growing up about the Holocaust all the time was that there were people who saw what was coming and they left and they survived. There were people who saw what was happening, they were like oh, this is getting bad, this doesn't look good, I think this is going a bad way, we got to get out of here. They left and survived.

And that there were people who stayed, who told themselves it wouldn't get that bad, these things weren't going to really happen, and then they died. It's very simplistic obviously, but that was the message. That's what I took away from it. Who knows about brains? Who knows what I was really told? That's what I took away from it as a kid.

So my brain saw what it thought was a danger, that there were Nazis in power, Jews were going to end up in concentration camps again. And it

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)

became really fixated on how to keep me safe. And of course, part of the way that - as a kind of religious minority, it was very easy for my brain to tell me that anybody who was coaching me about this who wasn't Jewish just didn't really understand.

So I sort of not - I doubled down on this, even though my brain was kind of losing it, I was doubling down on it with this sort of, well, if you're not Jewish, you don't understand. It's like, you can't coach me about this, which was not true. I was being completely illogical.

But that's what happens in your brain. So in my brain, I was like, okay, there's this danger. And when we see something we're afraid of, we want to believe we can control it. Either we just think we have no control over anything and not only will the thing happen but it'll make us feel terrible and we throw up our hands, or we think okay, let me just try to control this one thing. If I can control this one thing, then I don't have to be afraid and I don't have to control everything else. I don't have to deal with my fear of the things beyond my control.

And so for me, I picked knowing when to leave. In my mind, the way to be safe was that I needed to know when I should leave in this fantasy my brain had made up where we were ending up concentration camps. So this is not accurate, right?

Anything can happen. You can accurately predict violence or genocide and leave and then fall overboard on the boat on the way to the next country, or you can totally miss it, not predict it, stay where you are, and survive, and a million other things can happen.

It's always an illusion when we think we can control the future by knowing it. But this is just what my brain was doing. So I was going back and forth about this. I was really fixated on this fear that I wouldn't know when it was

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)

time to leave. Like I need to know when, what are the standards, what are the rules, what are the signs, when will I know. That's what I had all this anxiety about.

And so then I finally got coaching on it and I convinced my brain that we did need to listen to someone coaching me, even if they weren't Jewish. Thank goodness. And this is what I realized.

My fear is not that I would miss the point of no return and then experience hardship or even atrocity. It wasn't the circumstances that I was going to, in my mind, experience that I feared. It was that I was believing that if I missed my chance to leave, then I would have to be terrified and despair.

I was believing that at a certain point, I would not be able to manage my mind. That if I stayed too long and the time to leave passed, my emotional state would be unbearable, that I would be terrified, that I would blame myself, that I would tell myself I should have left, I should have gotten out, that I had made a mistake, and that my emotional life was going to be completely determined by whatever these external conditions were that were going to happen.

I was basically believing that I could totally manage my mind up until a concentration camp, and then at that point, I'd forget everything I knew, I'd have no control over my mind, and I'd have to live in terror and despair. That's what my brain was telling me.

Of course, once we surface this thought, I was able to see and remember that that's not true. One of my favorite thought work heroes, although he would not have called it thought work of course, is, Viktor Frankl. He's a Holocaust survivor who wrote a book called Man's Search for Meaning.

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)

And he has a famous quote in that book which I'm paraphrasing, but it's basically he says the last freedom left to man - let's say human, left to people of all gender identities. The last freedom left to man or human is the freedom to choose his own attitude in the face of any set of circumstances.

The last freedom left to man is the freedom to choose his own attitude in the face of any circumstance, in the face of any reality, in the face of any set of facts outside of us. This is also, by the way, why I just laugh when people think that thought work is white lady nonsense for the 1% or whatever.

It's literally I think after being able to find food and make fire, the most fundamental survival skill you need. The most powerful testimonies to this kind of work are the testimonies from people who have survived the unsurvivable and found the will to go on. That is why this work matters.

So when I finally saw that this was what was happening, I was assuming there was a set of circumstances in which I would be no longer able to manage my mind. If I missed the cutoff point, then that was it. I would not be able to manage my mind at all.

I realized that's where that desperate fear was coming from. It was the belief that there was this potential future where I was going to be experiencing all of this emotional suffering as if someone could take away my own ability to decide how I wanted to think and feel, how I wanted to view the world.

That powerlessness is what we really fear, which is a feeling. What we fear is the feeling of powerlessness. That, I think, is what we are really fearing when we fear that certain circumstances will happen. We fear that emotional experience.

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)

When we fear we're not thinking, "Okay, these circumstances will happen and I know how to manage, I know how to be resourceful, I know how to allow emotion, I know how to take care of myself, I know how to show up with resilience and bravery in this world." When we're thinking that, we're not afraid.

We may be nervous, we may be - courage requires some fear. That's what bravery is. But when we think that way, we are not panic-stricken, we are not hopeless, we are not overwhelmed, we are not despairing. It's not about the circumstance. It's about how we think we are going to feel and the fear of that powerlessness, that feeling of powerlessness, that's what we fear the most.

That's what we're afraid of. We're afraid that we will suffer in that way and that we will have no say in our suffering. But we always have a say in how we respond to our suffering. We always have a say in how we respond to any set of circumstances.

And when you believe that, when you remember that, you don't have to live in fear of the future. So let me touch on kind of the biggest objection you may have hearing this because you may have found this freaking out and not listened to any of the rest of the podcast, which is totally fine.

But the most commonplace objection is basically, so but things are going to get really bad for people and you're saying we should just be chill and not care. That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying number one, things are going to get really bad, that's an optional thought and you should check and see what kind of results you get before choosing to think it.

When you think that thought, is that creating productive action for you? Whatever your goal is. Are you making a voting plan? Are you helping

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)

other people vote? Are you creating policy plans? Are you researching where you want to move?

Whatever approach you're going to take, are your thoughts about this election or any election, or whatever you're applying this to, are they producing the action that you want to take? Is it producing the action that'll move you towards the world you want to have and create and live in and the life you want to have?

It's not about just don't care about anything. It's about thinking and feeling on purpose so that you have resilience, so that you have creativity, so that you have the ability to show up for the life you want, whether the politics are going the way you want and you can expand, do more work to expand even more things you care about, or when they're not going the way you want and you need to show up with resilience and creativity and courage for your survival, whichever one it is.

So if you want a refresher on this, I suggest going back to the episode I have called *What About Sexism*. I talk about emotional versus political resistance in that episode. You may want to politically resist what's happening now or will happen in the future, but your emotional resistance is just burning you out and preventing you from actually doing that.

Managing your mind is the best thing you can do for yourself and the best thing you can do for the world. And the president can't take away your ability to manage your mind, Steven Bannon, as I discovered, can't take away my ability to manage my mind. Your senator can't take it away, your school board chair can't take it away.

You're the only one who has power over your own mind, so use it on purpose and use it wisely. If you want some more help with this, I created a

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

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)

free download that is an election resiliency plan that will help you pick a positive or neutral thought to practice thinking if you're spinning out.

Make sure you get a little bit of productive work done every day, make sure that you do something a little pleasurable for yourself every day. Just kind of help give you some structure and a way forward if you're feeling really overwhelmed by your anxiety about potential outcomes or despair about an outcome that's actually happened.

So if you want to get that, again, it's totally free. You can just go to unfuckyourbrain.com/election, or you can text your email address to 347-997-1784. You'll get prompted for a codeword and you just use the word election.

So again, you text your email address to +1347-997-1784. And when you're prompted for the codeword, you just text back the word election, or go to unfuckyourbrain.com/election.

If this episode spoke to you and you spend time thinking about how to change the world and make it a better place, you need to be in The Clutch because as a social justice lawyer myself, I know that what often derails movements and people who are trying to make a difference is that they end up succumbing to so much unwanted anger and resentment and burnout and exhaustion and catastrophizing and just so much negative emotion that ends up burying and distorting all of the things that they wanted to do and achieve.

Learning how to manage your mind, how to process your emotions, and how to work with your thoughts is the way to create the change that you want to see, whether that's personally or professionally in yourself or in the world, without burnout and without overwhelm and without giving up.

UFYB 157: Election Emotions (2020 Politics & Beyond)

So come check it out. It's www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. Or you can just text your email to 347-934-8861. There's so much work being done on how to change the world outside of us, but if we don't learn how to change our internal worlds too, we're never going to accomplish those external goals and we wouldn't even be able to recognize and achieve the path to them when we wanted to.