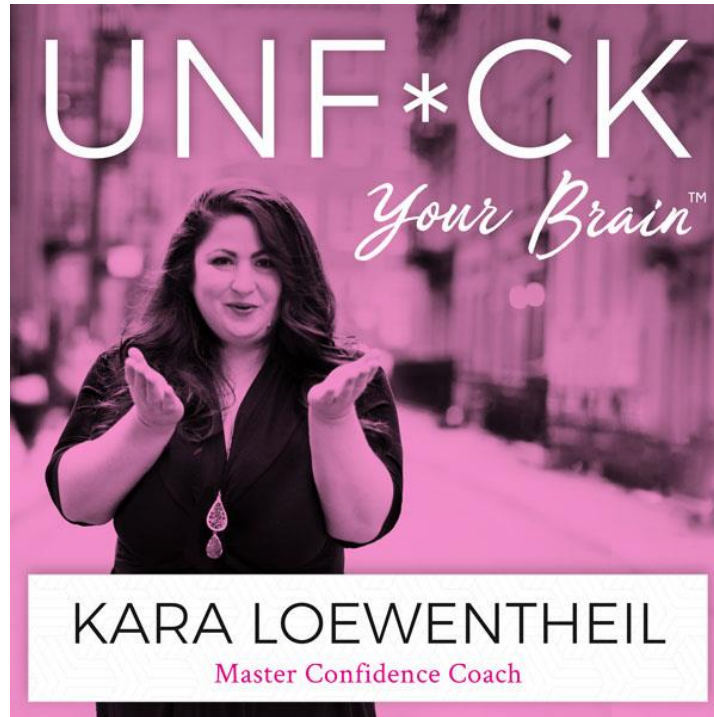


UFYB 159: You Are Not the Reference Point



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB 159: You Are Not the Reference Point

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 not going to lie; I'm feeling pretty kind of sleepy today. It's raining outside, it's the perfect day to be under the covers, but I have this podcast to work on for you. And I'm also today reading applications for a new Clutch coach, which is super exciting.

I'm hiring someone else to help us coach all the amazing women in The Clutch. When you start out as a solopreneur and you're doing everything yourself and then you start to expand your business and hire and there's a lot of growing pains you have to go through to learn how to be a manager and learn how to be a boss and learn how to be a CEO, instead of doing everything yourself, one of my favorite parts of having made that - I haven't made the journey.

It is an ongoing journey. But one of my favorite things about hiring people who are not me and growing this business is that I get to hire lots of employees and I get to give women a job that pays well and has benefits and has work-life balance and enables them to contribute to the world and help further a mission that they care about.

I think that's the dream, right? What could be better? But anyway, enough about me because that's kind of the theme of this episode. So today I want to teach you a concept you may have heard from your parents growing up in a different way if you had parents like mine, because my parents are certainly fond of telling myself and my siblings that we were not the center of the world, or the center of the universe, depending on how grandiose we were going.

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By which they meant not everything that was happening revolved around us and our preferences, which is accurate. But today I want to extend that concept and this teaching that I call “you are not the reference point.” It’s a little bit different than “center of the world.” Center of the world is kind of about thinking that anything anyone does is about you and that you’re the most important thing in the world.

I don’t think most women think they’re the most important thing in the world. Women are not really socialized to think that. But we do all just humans subconsciously believe that we are the reference point. I’m going to explain what I mean about that in this episode.

And I think it’s the single biggest obstacle to clear communication and perceiving other people accurately and unconditional acceptance and love. So here’s what I mean by this. It’s simple to explain but you have to really work to grasp it on a deeper level, and that’s when it will change your whole life.

So before we know about thought work, we generally assume our thoughts are true, or at least there’s some basis in reality out in the world for us to be thinking them. I think commonly we have subconscious beliefs about our own thoughts such as I wouldn’t think this unless it were true. We’ll often be like, well why would I come up with that unless there was evidence for it? Like why would I come up with that unless the outside world was suggesting this, or the facts suggest it’s true?

Or I think sometimes we subconsciously believe like, well I wouldn’t think this unless it was possible or probable. We sort of assume the rationality and the objectivity of our own thoughts. We basically just believe that if we came up with a thought, it’s because something in the outside world gave us a reason to do that.

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So when we learn about thought work, we start to question that, which is a very important positive first step. But what we still often don't see is the ways in which we are taking our own experience of the world, our own norms, our own ideas of what's obvious or standards or sensible, our own interpretations, we're taking all of those things as the reference point.

Here's what I mean by that. How often have you said something like, "Well if I were doing this project, this is what I would do." Or, "If I were in this relationship, this is how I would think about it." Or, "If I were dating someone and I liked this, this is how I would behave." Or, "If I were in charge of that initiative, this is what I would do." Or, "If I were the boss, this is how I would behave." Or, "If my kid was saying this thing, this is what I would do."

Every time you think something like that, you're measuring other people's behavior against what you think you would do or think or feel or say in their shoes. But when you do that, you are not actually putting yourself in their shoes because your perspective is still created and limited by your own thoughts and ideas.

So at best, you're wearing one of their shoes and one of your shoes. Or you've walked into their house, but you're still wearing your shoes. You're trying to reconcile this conflict in what you're seeing and how it's different from what you think a person would do, and you're still thinking about their life or their decisions or their behavior or their words or whatever from the perspective of your own thoughts and assumptions.

So I'm going to give you a couple of examples. The one I'm going to start with is one that comes from my own life, and this is kind of the point where I really realized this on a deeper level. So a while ago, I dated someone briefly whose communication style was extremely different from mine.

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I am a big texter with friends, if I'm dating someone, with my siblings, I'm very verbal. I'm usually home alone anyway, even when there isn't a pandemic. I grew up reading Victorian novels. I just really like communicating in the written word.

So if I'm close to someone, friendship wise or romantically, I will usually text with them pretty often. Someone I'm dating, at least once a day, some of my closest friends, multiple times a week. Occasionally skipping a day, it's not a fixed rule. But that's my natural inclination.

This person's natural inclination was to take anywhere from three to seven days just to respond to a text. So obviously the first several times this happened, I assumed the person was ghosting. Because in my brain, it was just impossible to believe that someone could be legitimately romantically interested in someone else and nevertheless text them back seven days later.

To me, that was impossible. My thought process was if you like someone, you would want to be in communication with them. When I like someone, I want to be in communication with them. If you like someone, you would text them back sooner, right? It was all being judged from my perspective.

So the first level was coaching myself to see okay, it's conceptually possible. The fact that I wouldn't operate this way when I like someone didn't mean anything because honestly, I wouldn't operate this way even if I didn't like someone. I respond to texts from people I don't really have anything to do with much quicker than that.

But the next level is where I really felt this click at a deeper level. I realized that the way I was coaching myself and I see this so much in my students, which is why I want to teach you this concept, was framed as I can believe

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it's possible for someone to not text back for three or five or seven days, even if they like someone.

So pop quiz, what is wrong with that framing? It's the even if. That even if is so subtle and sneaky, but it's doing so much work in this sentence. The sentence is okay, I can believe it's possible for someone to not text back for a week, even if they like someone.

That even if is implying that it's abnormal to be this way. That the normal thing is texting back in whatever amount of time I think is normal, and then I'm going to use my thought work to contemplate that someone could still like me and still behave abnormally.

You see what I'm saying? That even if implies that however I would do things or my assumptions about what's acceptable or normal are like the standard, and so I'm going to bend my brain to see how it's possible that sort of I don't have to make a particular meaning out of somebody else acting abnormally.

It's like, that's still weird and abnormal, but I don't have to make it mean that they don't like me. But the thought that it's abnormal is the whole problem. The whole problem is that thought that my way of doing things is standard or normal and that this person's way of doing things was a deviation from that.

So this is what I mean when I say that even when we are doing thought work or coaching ourselves, in so many unconscious ways, we still assume that our way of doing things, our way of thinking, our way of relating is the standard.

We think we are the normal ones. And that whatever we would think of or come up with is the normal thing. And so we're willing to contemplate the

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idea that someone might possibly be different from us, and our idea of sort of being open to that is like, allowing that to be kind of an acceptable deviation from the norm.

But that's not the reframe that will blow your mind. The reframe that blows your mind happens when you realize that you're not the standard. You're not the reference point. Your point of view is not the main point of view from which you should just stretch your brain to see if you can imagine how someone else might deviate.

In fact, your point of view is inherently limited, and it doesn't even account for or contemplate many, many other ways of thinking and feeling and doing that humans have. And so if you start to look for this, you'll see there are so many examples in your life where you're watching the way someone else acts and you're thinking about how you just can't imagine why or how they would act that way.

And your thought is always along the lines of like, well, anyone would know to do it this way or that way. Anyone would know to think about it this way or that way. But the truth is it's not anyone. When we think well, a normal person, or shouldn't they be in touch within this amount of time, or if someone knows this happened to me, shouldn't they reach out in this way or whatever else, it's always just you.

It's not anyone. It's not everyone who would see it that way. It's just you. You would think or feel or act differently than whoever the other person is because of your thoughts. But you are not the reference point. You are not the standard. Your way of thinking and your way of doing things are not the norm. They're not the obvious or sane or reasonable thing against which other people should be measured.

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This is such a disruptive mental habit and it's one reason that I think venting to your friends can be such a bad idea, compared to getting coached by objective peers like we do in The Clutch and coaches too, who don't share your biases and are coaching you from outside of them.

Here's the thing; your friends all generally agree with you about shit already. That's why you're friends. You've met a lot of people in your life who didn't agree with you about things and you're often not friends with them. You and your friends have similar values. You have similar communication preferences and styles, or at least close enough to maintain a friendship.

You have similarly priorities; you have similar interests you have similar habits. So when you say to your friends, "Can you believe that my boss didn't see I was upset and didn't ask me why? Don't you think anyone with a shred of human compassion would have noticed that and said something to show me that they care?"

Your friends all nod along and are like yeah, that boss is an asshole, anybody with any shred of human decency would have said something to you. How could they be so insensitive? They all believe all your same bullshit. They have similar perspectives to you. And they are also just trying to validate you because that's what people think friends are supposed to do.

But meanwhile, possibly the truth is your boss did notice but didn't say anything because their thought, which is very different from your thought, their thought was oh, looks like something's going on with her but I don't want to make her uncomfortable and ask her about something personal, it's not really my business as her boss and I don't want her to feel pressured to share with me, so I'm just going to treat her like a professional and show

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that I know she can do her job, and I'm just going to keep the subject on work. And that's the most polite, discreet thing I can do.

See what I mean? Two totally different ways of thinking about the same situation. But when you frame what you would like or what you would do as the norm that any good feeling, thinking human would do, you're just stuck in your own perspective and you create all of this story and meaning about other people and them being sort of beyond or outside the pale or the norm or the acceptable, when really, it's just your perspective.

I see this come up a lot in dating in a lot of different ways, but even just on first dates, I often have women clients who will complain that a man didn't ask them any questions. And I have talked to many men who say I don't ask questions because that seems like prying. I assume if somebody wants to share something with me, they will, and I don't want to ask them personal questions if they haven't wanted to volunteer that information.

I'm not saying that's always gendered, but I do think women are socialized to draw people out with questions and express interest that way, and men are less so. Totally different thought process. But when you're sitting there on the date thinking to yourself, "This guy is so self-centered," whoever, this person's so self-centered, what an asshole, anybody knows you should ask questions to draw people out, well no, not necessarily.

I mean, I ask a lot of questions. I was raised by a New York Jewish family of lawyers. I ask a lot of questions, possibly like a cross examination. I had a partner who grew up in the mid-west in a very different cultural context and he thought asking questions was prying. But if I had that mindset, I never would have gotten to know him.

When you try to reason about how other people should behave from your own premises, you're assuming that your brain and the way you see things

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are the reference point. They are the standard. And the farther away someone else's behavior gets from your reference point, the more inexplicable or outrageous you think it is.

Have you ever had this experience - I've definitely had this experience in relationships and I'm sure you have too, especially romantic relationships, where you're mad at someone, so you kind of start the fight, and then you're shocked to find out that they're mad at you.

Often about the same thing. Where you totally think you were the wounded injured party, and they think the same thing. That's exactly what's happening. You both think you're the reference point and that the other person's behavior was inexplicable or unacceptable from your own premises.

The more you can practice decentering yourself as a reference point in your own mind, the more you'll be able to see. When you stop assuming you're the reference point, you can see so much more clearly. You'll be able to see people for who they are and how their minds actually work.

You will stop taking other people's behavior personally because you stop running it through your own assumptions and biases. This doesn't mean you don't still make decisions about relationships or friendships or jobs or anything else. But it means you make them from a place of truly not attaching any meaning to the other person's behavior or resisting it and thinking it means they're wrong and bad and abnormal.

And the irony is that makes it way easier to make decisions about how to relate to other people. When you're really stuck in your own reference point and you're seeing the other person through your own lens of all of your own assumptions and prejudices and biases, and I don't even mean those in a negative way, just all of your values and ideas and assumptions and

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presumption and thoughts and preferences, like all those data points that make up you, when you're seeing someone through that lens, it's unavoidable that they just become a green screen for your projects about yourself.

You can't possibly see them clearly. You're just looking through so much clutter of your own assumptions. You can't possibly see clearly when you're viewing them through this lens of your own impossibly complicated mix of ideas and beliefs and values and feelings.

If you think about it, it's like your whole personality is made up of 53 million unique pixels where all those pixels are genetics and evolution and family and thoughts and preferences and values and beliefs and what you read and your friends and schooling. All the influences, moments of your life that have created you.

And then you look at somebody else who has a whole different 53 million unique little pixels of all of those things and you expect that they should look the same. But your 53 million isn't any more objective or normal or standard than theirs.

So you really have to stop thinking about other people's behavior through the lens of well, if I really thought this, I would do that. If I cared about a person, I would do that, if I were their boss, I would do that. Anybody who was trying to parent would do this, anybody who felt this way would do that. If I were in that circumstance, I would think and do this. You have to stop thinking about it that way.

You are not the reference point. If you let go of your grip on the fixed point, you will actually be able to float freely. You will see so much more and it will become much easier, not only to navigate the relationships in your life that you do want or need to stay in, but to let go of others because you see so

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clearly that it's just two different totally acceptable ways of thinking about the world.

And the question is just where they're compatible and you want to spend time with them, rather than making one of them wrong and bad and then being in resistance to it.

So start watching out for how often you're thinking well, if I were in that position or if I had that relationship, or if I had that thought, or if I saw somebody was upset, or if I knew my partner liked this, this is what I would do. Think about it this way; who cares what the fuck you would do?

When you're trying to understand someone else's behavior, the question of what you would do is irrelevant. Question is what are they thinking? And when you ask that question, you can actually learn and expand and grow your consciousness and your awareness of all the different ways of being and you will come to understand people so much more deeply and you'll come to understand yourself so much more deeply, which is always what we're after here.

Alright my chickens, none of you are the reference points but I love you all anyway. Have a good week.

If this episode was speaking your language, sounded like it was in your brain, I want you to come check out The Clutch because it will help you unfuck any relationship in your life. If you want to learn how to show up confidently in work relationships, family relationships, friendships, and romantic relationships, or in your parenting, The Clutch will be your lifeline.

It comes tailor made with a community of badass women doing this life-changing work alongside you, along with monthly coaching calls and daily

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expert coaching on any relationship you're working on, including your relationship with yourself.

Check it out at unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch, or you can just text your email to 347-934-8861. If you text your email address to that number, we will text you right back with a link to check out everything you need to know to join. I can't wait to see you there.