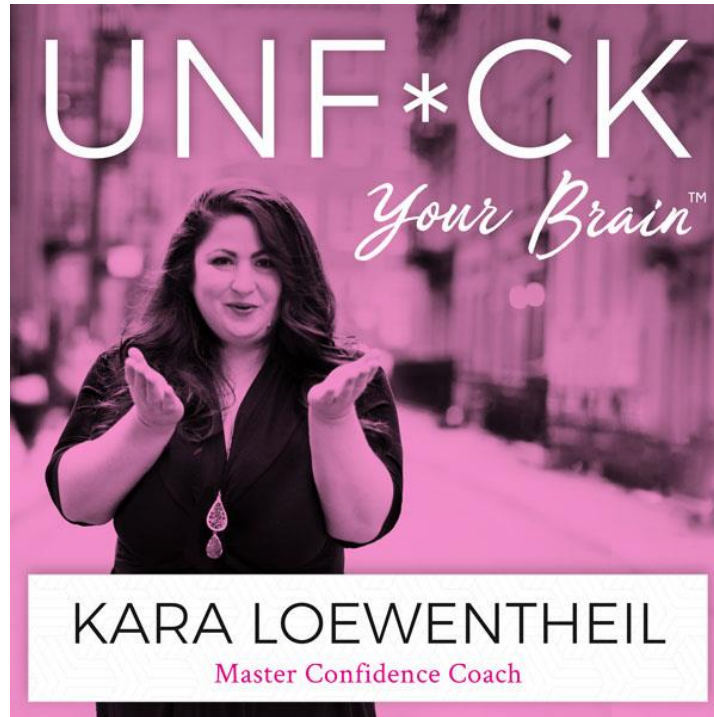


# UFYB 165: Saying No



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## UFYB 165: Saying No

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 all? So we are experiencing kind of our first real winter day here in New York, and I can't say I'm ready. I can't say I'm pleased. But I'm not going to resist what is. We know that's how suffering is created.

So I was actually just listening to the news and I heard two kind of fascinating things about the pandemic that I thought were such interesting examples of thought work. Not consciously. It wasn't stories about thought work, but they were such interesting examples about how to see multiple points of view, or different potential thoughts about an issue.

So the first one was - as anybody who pays attention to the news knows, they recently announced that there are two vaccines that have advanced in their clinical trials and have been found very effective. And so one of the scientists that was being interviewed about it was talking about there was this irony that they thought it would take much longer to get the results because in order for the study to progress, enough people in the test group had to naturally contract the virus.

This isn't a study where they are infecting people with COVID obviously. They just give the vaccine to a big diverse group of people who get the vaccine, and a big diverse group of people get the placebo. And then they just have to wait and see what happens, until a certain number of people in the placebo group have gotten it so they know that enough people have been exposed to it.

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And so they can do the analysis that shows what proportion of the people you would have expected to get sick in the trial group didn't. That's the layperson explanation. But basically the point is they have to wait for "natural" infection to happen in the community in order to test the vaccine.

And so the scientist was saying that they got the data faster than expected, precisely because the spread of COVID is so uncontrolled right now. And that just blew my mind from a thought work perspective because COVID, the coronavirus, it exists, right? It's something in the world that we cannot fully control.

It is a circumstance that is happening in the world. So one level of our suffering about it is our resistance to that. Our emotional resistance, where we think there shouldn't be COVID or pandemics, there shouldn't be illness, there shouldn't be death, this shouldn't be happening, this wasn't supposed to happen, it should have been prevented, or it should have been handled differently, it could be different.

That's what so much of Buddhist tradition teaches us, is that our suffering is always caused by our attachment to things being different than they are. But then there's the second level of suffering I think some of us have, myself often included with my thoughts, because we believe that our governments, wherever we live, should have handled things differently and if they'd handled things differently, less people would have gotten sick or died.

So we have this belief that there would have been, there could have been less suffering if people had acted differently. And then of course the irony is we are making ourselves suffer with that belief, which we can totally choose to do. Always up to us. Sometimes we want to have negative emotion and keep it.

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But it just scrambled my brain in such an amazing way to think, wait, what if when all is said and done, we could add up the math and it might be true that finding the vaccine faster because the spread was not controlled actually saved more lives in the end?

I obviously have no idea if that's true. I don't know how to do that math. I am not an epidemiologist. I'm not saying it is true, I'm not saying we should believe it. I just always love any moment where I'm really sure about something and then I hear an idea that completely turns what I thought on its head.

And I think that to me is one of the markers of somebody who's really embracing this work is before you embrace thought work, you don't want to be wrong. So when you have cognitive dissonance, you really double down on believing that you're right.

But when you've really embraced the idea that everything you think could be wrong and that that is actually amazing, that the more wrong you're willing to be about what you believe, the better your life will be, when you hear something that just completely upends the way you were thinking, it's always so powerful. Such a beautiful moment for me of being like, oh my god, that could be true and that would be such a different thought to the way I had been thinking about it.

So again, I'm not saying it is true or that I know it's true or even that I'm choosing to stick with that thought. I just love any moment that something that seems super true to me gets jiggled a little bit in my brain with a different idea or different point of view. That's such a good reminder about how when we decide to believe something, then we only see evidence that proves it true.

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And then I had this other kind of experience of similar thinking where in the same - this is a very intense NPR session. This is the second thing I heard from the same show was a public health expert who was talking about how we have to think about our public health messaging and the advice we give and our social discourse around COVID and socializing from a public health harm reduction approach.

And the public health expert was saying, listen, abstinence only sex ed doesn't work. Just don't do drugs doesn't work. We know from a public health standpoint that just telling people not to have sex or not to do drugs is not effective and it's actually counterproductive and that we have better public health outcomes when we give people adequate information and education so that they can protect themselves when they do the things that they're going to end up doing, like having sex and doing drugs.

And this public health expert was saying we're making some of the messaging around COVID is making the same mistake, that it's sort of telling people just stay home, don't interact with anyone, don't see anyone, and that just the truth that we know is that a lot of people aren't going to do that. They're not going to be abstinent in that sense, and that we're just going with this all or nothing, and we're not giving people useful, actionable, harm reduction advice.

Like if you are going to socialize, here is how you can do it the most safely and please do it in this way and please consider only doing it this much or whatever it is. And so I was thinking about how fascinating it is that I think if you lined up people's belief about sex ed, drug use, and COVID safety, you would get kind of a funny outcome, which is that I think that most people who believe in comprehensive sex ed and harm reduction education for drug use are also in a thought process of having this much more zero tolerance just don't do it approach to COVID safety, and believing that other people should just stop doing everything they're doing.

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And meanwhile, I think on the kind of ideological spectrum, people who are more likely to support abstinence only sex ed or who are more likely to think that we should just say no to drugs are more likely to be treating COVID as something to consider, but not have a zero-tolerance policy about it.

I'm excluding people who think it's a hoax. We're just not - putting that to the side. That's a whole other situation. So anyway, I just think that's super interesting to think about. I don't necessarily have a conclusion. I'm sure there are sociologists who have theories about it, but I just always think it's interesting to look at how my mind is working and look at my brain and watch the brains of the people around me and be like, oh, that's so interesting, why are they thinking that way?

Why would you have one thought in this situation and a totally different thought in this situation? Do we want to keep those completely different thoughts? Just noticing the ways that our thinking lines up in certain ideological ways or doesn't is such a fascinating window into how our brains work and how people's brains are working around us.

And I think it's so interesting to think about why would people, who are very in favor of public health and harm reduction kind of messaging, in one area be very zero tolerance, abstinence only in another area. It's just a little interesting brain experiment.

Brains are wild y'all. That's what I'm saying. That's my current events thought work update. I actually had a whole other topic I was going to talk about today, which I'll now talk about another time because while I was kind of writing out my notes about that first part, I got a text from a friend, a colleague of mine, who is a badass super successful coach.

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And she was having so much mind drama about saying no to a simple request from someone to do something that she didn't want to do. And so then I yelled at her at her request. I didn't really yell. You know what I mean. When I say I yell, what I mean is I coached her firmly.

But now I'm going to yell at all of you, by which I mean coach you firmly about saying no. Because this is a thing that so many women deal with. Women have a really hard time saying no in many different situations. So I'm going to talk about why that is before I talk about how we can start feeling more willing and comfortable to say no, or at least willing to be uncomfortable while saying no.

So saying no to a request or a demand or an action by someone else is one of those things that I think really activates multiple levels of our programming. And so the first thing is to know that it's completely normal that you have a hard time saying no.

That's not because saying no is inherently difficult. Toddlers say no all the time. They don't find it difficult at all. But your socialization makes it difficult in several ways that we have to learn to undo. And this is so important in general to remember because we do this form of shame or blame with ourselves, I think where if we find something hard or challenging, we think the only options are that number one, it's truly difficult and that needs to be validated.

We want other people to agree with us about how hard it is. and that feels good temporarily because it means you stop blaming yourself for a minute. But now you've kind of fucked yourself because now you have to believe that it will always be hard.

Or we think the other option is number two, it's not truly hard and that means we're weak or dumb, or there's something wrong with us because

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we find it hard. Neither of those are ever your only two options. There's always a third option.

So much of coaching is finding the third option that your brain just did not consider. And in this case, the third option is it's not inherently hard. It's hard because of the way you're thinking about it, and that's not because there's anything wrong with you. It's because of how your brain was taught to think.

So that's the kind of hard that can be changed. We don't have to blame the thing for being hard. It's not inherently hard to say no. And we don't have to shame ourselves for finding it hard. Anything is hard if you don't know how to do it and you haven't been taught how. So we just need to teach your brain how to do it, how to make it less hard. That's all.

So here are the levels that make saying no hard. I often talk about how as humans, we evolved in small tribal groups where reciprocity was very important for your literal survival. People who did not help the group did not get help from the group back and they probably died out. Those genes did not get passed on. They did not survive.

What enables tribal living, much less stationary communities is division of labor and resources and reciprocal support. So we have an evolutionary tendency to want to say yes to other people when they ask for our help, especially if they have ever done anything for us. And that's pretty normal in today's world in an ongoing relationship of some kind.

If it's a friend or a parent or a boss or someone on the PTA with you or whatever it is. We also have a hard time if we ever think we might need something from them in the future. Again, totally normal in an ongoing relationship.



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But even in a random encounter, it is often pretty hard for humans to say no when someone else asks for something that seems within the kind of community norms or bounds. So we just have a pretty ingrained at this point psychological reflex towards reciprocity, towards saying yes when we are asked for help, especially if we think that we've ever been helped by someone or going to need their help.

That is for everybody. But on top of that, women in particular are socialized to be nice, to be compliant, to be quiet, to be fair, a good girl is seen and not heard. We say boys will be boys about their rambunctious behavior and independence, but there's no equivalent saying about girls.

Girls are socialized from early on to believe that our value lies in being helpful. Just think about the long history in probably your own family of only daughters being taught how to do household chores.

Now, that was one thing when most people worked with their hands for a living back in the old days, and the boys were being trained to do farm labor and maybe the women were doing more household labor. That's a division of labor. Both people are doing labor.

But that's not what's going on now when in many families even today, after a family event, the men are drinking whiskey or watching football and the women are cleaning up the meal. Women are socialized to help, to do labor for other people, and not expect reciprocity even in return.

I think in recent years, we have started thankfully paying a lot of attention to the ways that women often feel disempowered to say no and often feel pressured to provide pleasure or value or just their own bodies to someone else even when they don't want to. Sometimes because of course they fear physical violence, but often simply because they have not ever been taught that they're truly allowed to say no.

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And they haven't been taught how to get through and manage the awkwardness or unpleasantness that they fear they will experience if they say no. Again, I want to be so clear. I'm not saying that fear of physical violence isn't sometimes the reason that women are coerced into sexual activity and not just women.

People are coerced into sexual activity they don't want. It absolutely is. And in that case, fear or awkwardness about saying no is really not the issue. And so thought work can be helpful there in helping you process and response to what you've experienced in the moment or afterwards, but it's not going to prevent that. That has to come from the ways that we educate and teach and respond to people who commit those acts of violence.

But that fear of physical violence is not the only reason that women or other people don't say no. I have coached so many women who had "ambiguous" sexual encounters where they didn't really want to have sex, but they didn't feel empowered to clearly communicate that, even though they were not really afraid for their physical safety.

It was more that they were doubting that they were allowed or entitled to say no because they were blaming themselves for getting themselves into the situation because that's what women are socialized to do, to blame themselves, to think they cause whatever's happening.

So they didn't feel empowered because of that or they didn't feel like they had the words, they didn't know what to say, they thought it would be awkward, they thought the person would be upset. And it can sound when you talk about it that way like you're trivializing it, but it's not trivial at all.

Women are socialized from birth to be terrified of other people's displeasure of them. If you are taught that your whole value and worth depends on other people liking you, then it is not a small thing to ask you to

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do something that you predict is going to make someone else not like you or think badly about you or be mad at you.

That's not a small thing when you've been socialized that way. And this is why learning how to say no with confidence and strength is so important. Obviously, we need to change how we socialize everyone so that active, enthusiastic sexual consent is the norm and that's what people are seeking.

But this is a podcast for women who feel anxious about saying no, so that is what I'm focusing on here. And it applies in some subset of those kinds of sexual encounters, but that's also not the only place that women have a hard time saying no.

Your brain isn't really divvied up like that. So women aren't socialized just to believe that their bodies or their sexuality belong to other people or belong to men or can be kind of taken without their consent or are rightfully due to other people just for having been nice to them, or having had the thought that they wanted to, or having gone out to dinner, whatever else it is.

Women are socialized to believe that their entire purpose in life is to help other people and make other people happy and make other people like them. So if you raise someone to believe that their time and their energy and their body and their abilities and everything that they are or have belong to someone else, just for the asking or the taking, if you raise someone to believe that the most important thing is pleasing other people, if you raise someone to believe that their worth depends on whether other people think they are nice and helpful and pleasing, then how can you expect them to feel comfortable saying no?

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In general, the way many of us were raised had a lot to do with teaching us how to operate in a society that depends on people, but especially women doing things they don't want to do, being polite when they don't want to be polite, and when they do the things they don't want to do, being touched when they don't want to be touched, going along with things that are uncomfortable or that they don't want to do so as not to rock the boat.

Many of us were raised that way, and to some extent, every part of the process of socialization is a little bit like this for everyone. Toddlers have amazing boundaries. Toddlers of either gender. But part of being sort of raised and socialized is often teaching them to ignore those boundaries.

To hug the person you don't want to hug or be nice to the person you don't want to be nice to or whatever else. And I'm not blaming everybody's parents. This is a balance. Society doesn't work if everyone just steals each other's trucks and pees in the sandbox all the time.

But we way overdo it, especially with women, teaching them to do things they don't want to do, go along with things they don't want to go along with, let people touch them, even when they're uncomfortable. We sort of erode over time women's ability to feel confident and comfortable saying no.

And so we've ended up with women in every generation feeling terrified to say no, even when they really don't want to do something, and even when there isn't actually going to be a dangerous repercussion. Sometimes there is, and then that makes sense, but a lot of the time there isn't. It's just the weight of that socialization.

Women do not feel entitled to their own time, their own attention, their own energy, their own money, their own bodies. We don't feel entitled to anything that is ours, or to prioritizing ourselves. And we don't trust our own sense of what's important to us or what we want to do.

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So if you're someone who has trouble saying no in any context, the first thing to understand is there's nothing wrong with you. You are not just weak-willed. But it's also not a badge of honor.

Sometimes those of us who have trouble saying no, I think we think about it like well, it's because I'm so sensitive to what other people will be upset about. It's like I'm an empath so I can't say no. No, you don't want to think about it that way. That's not helpful for you because that will keep you stuck in that space of not saying no.

So here's what I really want you to think about. When you are asked to do something you don't want to do, again, we're putting aside when you are in physical danger. Most of the time, most of the things you're asked to do that you don't want to do or that someone's trying to get you to do are not actually physically dangerous.

A lot of this is happening with things like serving on that committee you don't want to serve on, going to that holiday you don't want to go to, doing that thing at work that you don't really have time to do, whatever it is. Here's what you have to realize about saying no.

You are always saying no to something. When you say yes to doing something you don't want to do, you are saying no to yourself. You are saying no to what you really want and to your own truth. You're saying no to the rest that you need; you're saying no to having time to work on that side hustle or passion project. You're saying no to being able to cook yourself a real meal or play with your kids or have sex with your partner.

Women are socialized to find it so much easier to say no to ourselves than to say no to anyone else. And that is what we have to work on reversing because it leaves us living our lives for other people. Not for ourselves.

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The lie is that you can say yes to something without saying no to something else. We just pretend that we can somehow do it all or fit it all in. And that is part of what enables us to just keep saying yes, even to things we don't want to do or don't have time to do, and that kind of squash out all of the time or energy or resources that we have for the things we really do want to do for ourselves, for our life, for our pleasure, for our business, for our family, for whatever it is.

So you have to think about it. It's never a question of just saying yes to something. It's always a question of what you are saying no to. Any time you decide to do one thing or ask to do one thing, if you say yes to that, you are saying no to something else you could do with that time or energy or money.

And sometimes that's awesome and totally worth it. It's always a tradeoff. But sometimes it's not. And the more you frame this honestly for yourself, the easier it will become. You have to have a sense of how you spend your time and your money and your energy so that you can tell yourself the truth about what you're saying no to when you say yes to something that you don't want to do.

And I think this is one reason that the calendar system that I teach in The Clutch for time management and planning out your time is so powerful because it makes you so aware of how you are spending your time. Any time you're asked to do something, I want you to pause and ask yourself, what are you saying no to if you say yes to this thing?

You can always ask for time to think about it or decide so you can sit down and really look at it. You're going to have to say no to something. Whether it's the thing you've been asked to do, or whether it's the activities you won't be doing in your own life if you say yes.

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You have to give up the lie that you can just say yes without saying no. You have to be honest with yourself. You're always saying no to something. So what are you going to say no to? Are you going to say no to someone else or are you going to say no to yourself?

And if you always choose to say no to yourself, is that how you want to live your life? You can learn how to say no and feel totally fine doing that. You can learn how to feel entitled to choose yourself. But it's a process and here's the thing about doing this, it's akin to learning to stop people-pleasing in that you can do the thought work to feel better about it over time. But you cannot wait until you feel perfectly comfortable to start doing it.

So you have to give up that fantasy. This is not something where you get great at it in a vacuum, you just practice it on your own, and then when you're ready you go out and say no and it feels amazing. Saying no will feel terrible at first. You will probably be anxious, you will worry about what the other person thinks, they may even be visibly or verbally upset, and you'll have to deal with that.

But you have to remember that nothing has actually gone wrong. It's totally fine for someone else to be upset. You're saying no. You're saying I choose me over you and what you want me to do. Of course we all want other people to choose to please us instead of themselves. Totally human and natural. It's okay that the other person thinks that.

You have to know for yourself nothing's actually gone wrong. Your brain thinks something has gone wrong. That's why you feel upset. But that doesn't mean something has gone wrong. It's just a system error. It's just a brain malfunction.

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If you want to start being more comfortable saying no, step one is really being truthful with yourself so you can get to the saying no part, but you also have to embrace that it will be uncomfortable, especially in the beginning. And you have to stop reacting to that discomfort as if something has gone wrong or that discomfort is a good reason to say yes to something that you don't want to do.

You have to prepare for that discomfort and try to embrace it. If you're doing an exercise and your muscles start to shake, it's really hard to do the last few reps, you don't panic and think, oh my god, something's gone terribly wrong, right? You think hell yeah, this is working, this is really hard, and I want it to be over but it's for a good cause and I know I'm going to be stronger afterwards.

Same thing here. How you react to and think about that discomfort is actually more important than even getting rid of the discomfort in the first place. So no matter how much thought work you do to feel more comfortable saying no to things you don't want to do, it's going to feel weird and awkward at first.

Don't fight that. Don't make it mean anything has gone wrong. Just embrace it. It's a sign that you are trying something new, you are learning, you are growing, and that's what all of this is about. That's what's always worth saying yes to. Alright my chickens, go say no to something. Have a good week.

If you're loving what you're learning in the podcast, you have got to come check out The Clutch. The Clutch is my feminist coaching community for all things Unfuck Your Brain. It's where you can get individual help applying all these concepts I teach to your own life and learning how to do thought work to blow your own mind.



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It's where you can learn new coaching tools not shared on the podcast that will change your life even more. It's where you can hang out and connect over all things thought work with other podcast chickens just like you and me. It's my favorite place on earth and it will change everything, I guarantee it.

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