

# UFYB 168: Not Normal - Conformity, Safety, and Fear of Standing Out



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## UFYB 168: Not Normal - Conformity, Safety, and Fear of Standing Out

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. I am recording this just as we are getting ready for a snow storm here on the East coast. It's the first one of the season. And I love snow storms because I think they're an excuse to get all cozy in place if you can stay inside.

And pre-pandemic, that felt like such a departure from everybody's normal scurrying around, but even now that I'm - I've always worked from home since I had a coaching business and now I don't go anywhere either. There's still something soothing about a quiet white landscape.

Also, I'm hoping that maybe it'll mean that they stop running a buzzsaw in the courtyard of my building, which would also be nice. So right before I started recording this, I got a text from a friend that used the phrase, "Making the best of things."

And I have been mulling over it because that phrase sounds kind of positive. But when you think about it, it sort of assumes that things are not already the best. It's like a silver lining thought. Like oh, here's this pile of shit and I guess I'll try to make a little shit sculpture out of it or something.

I just think it's fascinating to think about the way we feel entitled for everything to just be the way we want it. As if our wanting it, just the thoughts in our mind really has any bearing on what's going to happen in the universe. I mean, of course I think our thoughts create our results. But in terms of we sort of feel like just because we want something to be a certain way, that's a good enough reason that it should be that way.

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Like the world owes us things being the way we want. I think we can create things the way we want a lot of the time through our thoughts, feelings, actions, and results. Not always. We can't think away certain things in the world.

We can create a lot of things to be the way we want our lives, much more than we think we can. But we certainly aren't entitled to them being that way. I see this really often in my students when they start thought work that they'll present this kind of problem they're having, which is like, well, when I think this new thought I feel better, but my old thoughts come back really fast.

I've talked before about how that's normal, what to do about it, we work on that in The Clutch, how you handle it, it's totally normal. But also, just stop and think about how you're framing that. If you're someone who thinks this way. It's like you're entitled to have your new thoughts work all the time. It's so problem-focused, rather than awe-focused.

You can either think of it as, "Well, I am able to think this new thought and it does feel better, but my old thoughts keep coming back," which is so focused on how it's not 100% perfect yet and it's not exactly the way you want it. Or you could think, "I can change a thought in my brain on purpose. This shit actually works. Even occasionally."

How amazing and fucking awesome is that? That's what I mean. We are so primed to focus on the negative. So even when we successfully change a thought, we just focus on how sometimes it isn't changed.

No matter how sorry I'm feeling for myself occasionally, I can look around my life and be like, I live in a house that protects me from the elements. That is not something everyone gets. How lucky am I? There's food in my fridge, there's running water that will not give me dysentery. These are not

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things that most humans throughout the world have had historically or even have now.

And that's not a like, you should be grateful thing. We know that doesn't work, should-ing yourself with gratitude is not effective. And everybody's thoughts create negative feelings for them no matter what the material circumstances of their lives. So none of it is to say you shouldn't have negative emotions.

But it's just when you're in that particular feeling sorry for yourself victim mindset that I really don't find that helpful ever. It's not really clean pain. It's just kind of self-indulgent. That's when you want to be like, but wait a minute, look at all these literal miracles around me that most people in human history have not gotten to experience.

And the same thing here. You can focus on how your new thought is "only working" a tenth of the time, a quarter of the time, as you're learning it, which of course is just a necessary stage on the way. But even being like, "Well, this is part of the process, it will get better," assumes there's a problem, as opposed to being like, "Oh my god, I can change a thought on purpose. And my brain believes it and I feel a little different. That's crazy, that's amazing."

Imagine you are someone who had pain all the time or struggled to breathe or something, and then there were short periods where you feel good. I experience a lot of chronic pain, people have, myself included. You can think wow, this is amazing, or you can think, why isn't it like this all the time?

The human brain has a bias for negativity. That's so important to understand about your mind. And it makes evolutionary sense. People who remembered things that were dangerous were more likely to survive. You need to remember which berries are poisonous and made you sick, more

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than you need to remember which ones are delicious if it comes down to survival.

We tend to remember dangerous things more prominently and avoid them more, and those animals and then humans who did that survived more and passed on their genes. But we are not surviving in the wilderness based on which berries are poisonous anymore, which means that your brain is going to overemphasize things if things are negative and forget things it thinks are positive.

Just all on its own. If you don't intervene, that's what it's going to do. So if you don't take that into account, you will just believe your brain and you will just focus where it tells you to focus on the negative. Even if the negative was true. Even if we could say yes, that's objectively negative.

Your brain, if you don't intervene, is going to over focus on those things and forget the positive things. So you have to consciously focus on the positive. My friend Susan Hyatt calls this staying in the miracle. I love that term. But you can also just call it remembering to redirect my brain to the positive, for those of you who don't like miracle talk.

This is related to what I want to talk to you about today because today's topic is the way that our desire to stay safe by conforming to the world around us and sort of prioritizing our fear of negative outcomes gets in the way of creating the amazing lives we really want and are capable of having.

And that's why I want to talk about the desire to conform, the desire to be like everyone else, the desire to be "normal," where it comes from, how it manifests, and how it's fucking you up, and how you can start to shift it.

So conformity means being the same as. So we talk about conforming, we mean acting the way other people act, or following a certain set of rules

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and codes of behavior, whether those are explicit or implicit. So that could be any kind of community, small or large, specific or general.

Sometimes those communities are really clearly delineated, like it's a religion and you know who's in it and who's not and who came up with the rules. And sometimes they are more amorphous, they have unwritten rules like a social community that isn't really defined of some kind.

And you can think of conformity as the other side of the fear of rejection. Humans fear social rejection so deeply because we evolved in small tribes where social acceptance was literally life or death. If the tribe decided to shun or banish you, you were dead. Even if you had a falling out with one or two people it could affect your survival.

So conformity is the way we try to get along and not stand out in order to try to avoid rejection. It's the other side of rejection. It's like the compensatory mechanism we develop in order to deal with our fear of rejection.

So we think if we just act normal and are the same as everyone else, we won't be rejected. So many people, especially so many women who are not encouraged to stand out, women are encouraged to be normal and the same as each other, secretly harbor the fear that they are not normal.

And for most people, that's a fear. It's a bad thing they think to not be normal. And we're talking about deep in your subconscious. Even if you are someone who kind of protests too much about how you don't want to be normal, check your subconscious. There's probably thoughts about how it's a problem to not be normal.

And I'm not saying it's true objectively to not be normal obviously. I'm just saying that's the premise in our brains. There's so many things we do or try to be or get or experience in life so that we can think that we are normal.

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Because we have made normal mean there's nothing wrong with me, I'm the same as everyone else.

And of course when we're doing that, we forget that normal is all made up. I mean, there are some common norms. Most of us wear some kind of clothing when we leave our homes. But a lot of what we think is normal is entirely based on what our community or friends or social peers or a member of our religious house or whatever are doing.

For some people, getting married in your early 20s and having babies immediately is totally normal. For some people, doing it in your 30s and 40s is normal. For some people, getting married at all is weird and not doing it is normal.

Our brains are always scanning for what seems normal in our immediate community, however we define that. And then we're looking for the ways we are different from those other people. So on the one hand, we have this deep desire to be normal because of what we make it mean. We make being normal mean value, worth, safety, acceptance by the group, which our primitive brain thinks is essential for our survival.

And so we train our brains to spend all this time thinking about the parts of us that we think are not normal and obsessing over how to change those things. Whether that's a certain number or kind of friendships, having certain kinds of romantic relationships, having a certain kind of family, looking a certain way, being a certain size, weighing a certain amount, doing a certain activity, et cetera.

And especially in our world of social media days, I do think that the kind of diversity of different community norms is also getting flattened and we're all kind of being marketed to subscribe to a really generic conventional form of normalcy where everybody is supposed to look and be and act the same and own the same things and do the same things.



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So it sort of gets even worse, and you're exposed through social media to so many more people, so many more opportunities to compare yourself than if you were living in a village of 300 people.

Of course, the irony is we're all doing this. So really, no one feels like they're fully normal because we are all - if you had a group of 100 people and all of them are constantly scanning to see if they're normal or abnormal from each other. It's like a big vicious cycle.

So the first level of this work is realizing that normal is all relative. You've made it all up in your mind, and you really can't trust your brain about what it tells you is normal because it's a biased narrator. You've told it, "Hey, any speck of being abnormal might make us die," so your brain is going to find some shit that's abnormal because that's what you told it to do and it thinks it's helping you and it's totally going to blow this out of proportion.

But the deeper level of this work is realizing that even if it were true, that yes, other people are normal, meaning there's some norm, some average, some most common thing that you are not, that's not what makes someone happy or not happy.

Your brain just is as usual confused about what causes feelings. Your brain is not correct that if you change the abnormal thing to the normal thing, you'll feel better. Your brain's logic is usually you're having a negative emotion, we should always feel good. If you're feeling bad, it's because something's wrong, and what's wrong is probably you. And even having this emotion is making you abnormal, so stop having it but also change the thing underneath it, right?

But here's the truth; everything amazing you want in your life is the opposite of normal. Because amazing isn't normal. By definition, extraordinary isn't normal. The extraordinary is not the ordinary.



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So if you want a life that's more than ordinary, and that doesn't mean that you are like, flying around on a jet or sailing across the ocean by yourself. It just means if you want a life that is more intentional and more authentic and more deeply lived than most people, than the norm, which I really encourage all of you to want.

Because these days, the norm is to be running through life, just running away from stress and towards numbing and just sort of trying to be productive at all costs and guilting and shaming ourselves. That's the norm.

So if you want something different, it's not going to be normal. Being amazing isn't normal. What's normal is believing other people cause your feelings. That's the norm. Most people believe that. Believing that your thoughts are all true, believing you just have to make do with what you have, believing that you're not good enough.

Everybody believes that. Believing that you don't deserve to be happy, believing you can't have everything you want, or that you can't have anything you want. Believing that life just sucks, or just is hard, and has to be and that's that.

Believing that your circumstances determine what you can achieve or how you can feel. That's so normal. So many people believe that. Believing you're a victim of your own life, believing that only a few people in the world can do whatever it is you want to do. Find their soulmate, or make a million dollars, or travel the world, or publish a book, or create a side business, or have a loving marriage, or whatever it is.

And especially if you're a woman, normal is believing you're not good enough, believing you have to get better, believing you have to improve yourself and develop yourself and become a better person always.

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Hating how your body looks, completely normal. Feeling self-conscious during sex and worrying more about your partner's orgasm than your own or pleasure than your own, completely normal. Putting everybody else's desires above your own because you're too terrified to upset anyone, completely normal.

All the things that will hold you back in life are normal in the sense that most people are operating with those same beliefs and manuals. All totally normal things to believe. But if you want a life that stands out, you can't have it believing those same normal things and being those same normal ways.

You have to be willing to stand out. If you want a life that's amazing, you have to be willing to not be normal. If you want an extraordinary life, you have to be willing to not be ordinary. It is not normal to believe that you can create whatever result you want in life. It is not normal to believe that you can decide how to think and feel and do that on purpose and decide what kind of person you're going to be and change your personality if you want to and change your job and change your partner and change your house, change whatever it is you want.

Of course circumstances don't change feelings, that's not why we're doing it. But when we change our thoughts, our feelings and our actions and our results can all change and we can achieve and experience so much more. It's not normal to believe you can do that.

It is not normal, especially for women, to believe that you have an infinite capacity and ability to develop. Maybe it's not truly infinite, but given the limited human lifespan, it is infinite. No one gets to the limit of theirs in their life if they keep believing that there's more.

It's not normal to love your body as a woman in this society, or even accept it and stop trying to fight changing it, stop trying to fight the normal aging

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process. Not normal. It's not normal as a woman in this society to prioritize your own happiness at all, much less more than other people's, and fulfillment over men's opinions of you or your family members' opinions of you or whatever it is.

It is not normal as a woman in this society to dream big and go after huge goals, to live life on your own terms as a woman is so not normal. We try to be safe to conform, but when we are stifling our true selves and our true potential, and when we are just trying to flatten ourselves to be like what we imagine other people are like, you will never actually feel safe.

That is the tragic irony of this whole thing. The more normal you try to be, the less safe you feel because the truth is that everybody is actually different on the inside. So that when we're all trying to make ourselves be some sort of idea of normal that we've come up with just based on what we see on other people's outsides.

We don't feel safe or stable at all because we're constantly aware of the discrepancy. We're ignoring our true selves in order to secure the approval of other people from being just like them. And of course really, it's just your own approval. It's your own brain doing this whole drama.

It's not like the group gets together and votes on whether you're finally normal. It's just your own brain. And if you tell your own brain that being at all different from other people means there's something wrong with you, that is all your brain will ever look for and you will never ever reach the promise land of finally being "normal" enough.

When you ignore your true self and you value your imagined approval from other people over who you truly are or the way you might truly want to live if you got underneath that desire to be normal, you will always feel incredibly unstable. And that's because you are. You've based your okayness now on being the same as everyone else and on having everyone else validate

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how normal you are in your own mind again. It's all happening in your own brain.

So you will constantly have to be worried about whether you're normal enough or not. It is impossible to overstate how real this is. When you ignore your true self, you constantly feel unstable. When you accept and embrace your true self, you are so grounded that nothing and no one can knock you over.

I just think of all the people who have believed in things that seemed impossible in their time. Like how sure in their conviction they had to be to do something new.

When you have your own back, it does not matter what anyone thinks of you. It feels completely different emotionally to be in one state versus the other. We all spend so much time thinking about how we wish we were normal and just like everyone else. But everything about you that is wild and special and free and world-changing is what is different about you.

No one has ever changed the world by being the same as everyone else. The desire for conformity is totally understandable. It doesn't mean you're shallow, it doesn't mean that you're insecure and should get over it. It's an evolutionary tendency and it's really exacerbated by gender-based socialization. The way you're socialized as a woman.

But it's never going to solve the problem you're trying to solve. Conformity will never actually make you feel safe. When you base safety on conformity, you have to constantly monitor yourself to see if you're conforming and being normal enough, and you have to monitor everyone else to see if they think you're normal, or if they have sensed that you're weird or different or wrong.

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Conformity is a trap. It promises you safety, but it's actually quicksand. It drags you under and it makes you feel like you're drowning and you will never feel safe.

So you get to decide, do you want to try to be "normal" and live a "normal" life, which is let's be real, a normal life is a life in which you care more about what other people think about you, or what you imagine they think about you in your own head, and being like the masses, more than you care about being your true self and making a difference in the world.

Or are you willing to sacrifice the false safety of trying to be normal in order to be the weird, unique, and wonderful creature that you are? The irony is if everyone did that, if we all stop trying to be like each other and became our true freest most weird, wonderful selves, that's what would be normal.

Then being yourself would be normal. Being different would be normal. And that's the only kind of normal that I would ever want to be. Have a beautiful week my chickens. Go be abnormal and embrace it.

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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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