

**UFYB 171: Greatest Hits Vol 1.
Perfectionist Fantasies + Tomorrow Thinking**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Perfectionist Fantasies + Tomorrow Thinking

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. So the episodes that I did around the turn of the year about how to make resolutions and impossible goals have brought up so many good questions and insights. And one of the things that has really become clear to me is that there's a real deep level of understanding that is required to fully comprehend what I'm teaching when I teach about the idea of perfectionist fantasies and tomorrow thinking, versus realistic and even unrealistic in a good way goal-setting, versus unrealistic in a bad way.

And so one of the things I'm going to be doing over the next few months is re-releasing some of my most popular but also most advanced episodes because I really think that in order to grasp these concepts at a deep level, you have to listen to them more than once, and possibly more than twice.

I know that in my own study and practice of coaching and thought work, I revisit the most challenging and the most valuable and useful podcast episodes or books or whatever else from a teacher that I follow frequently. And every time I do, I get a new level of insight and a deeper awareness because I'm coming to it with a different brain.

Even if I listened to it last week, my brain has changed and now I'm able to sort of see and appreciate it on a deeper level. I get asked all the time kind of what do I think are the best episodes of the podcast, or the most important ones, or the best place to start, all different things. And I think that this episode, along with a few more that I will be re-releasing over the next couple of months are the episodes that benefit the most from continual and renewed study, and the ones that will resonate at a deeper and deeper level every time that you listen to them.

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So without further ado, here is the episode that I did over a year ago on perfectionist fantasies and tomorrow thinking. If you've never heard it, this is an awesome opportunity to hear it for the first time. And if you have already heard it, I encourage you to listen to it again and really clarify and explicate for yourself what do you get out of it that's different this time.

What is more that you can learn from it? Any time that you revisit a text or a podcast episode or a teaching, you want to go into it not thinking what do I already know, but thinking what can I learn that's new? What can I see that I didn't see here before? What hits me in a different way now?

If you're in The Clutch, a great exercise would be for you to go post in the Facebook group about exactly what you took away from this episode, listening to it again with fresh ears, with that beginner's mind that we always talk about when it comes to coaching and learning and teaching this work.

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I'm really excited about this concept, perfectionist fantasies, because it's something I've been noticing more and more in my clients and in myself. It's not a new phenomenon by any means. I didn't just discover it. But the more that I think about it and the more that I kind of isolate it as a specific thought pattern, the more I see how it's manifesting in so many areas of my clients' lives.

So I think most of you have heard me say this, but I am not psychic. The reason that it seems like I might be, that I always know what's going on in your brain is that I pay attention to my brain.

I'm always studying my own experience and my own mind and taking that work deeper, even when it is confusing and hard and challenging and it hurts my brain. And I see that in some of my students. They want to believe

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that they're different from me. They want to think that I have it all figured out and that there's something wrong with their brain for not being able to already know how to do what I teach.

I was not born like this, y'all. Think about it. If I was born knowing how to manage my mind, how would I know how to do it and teach it? If I was born this way, I would just say like, well I don't know, that's just how my brain works. The fact that I can teach it in such detail is the proof that my brain used to be like yours and that this work will change it. The reason I understand your brain so well is that I have done all this work on myself.

I never ever teach you something that I haven't tested or learned or developed and refined by using it on myself first, and that's why I'm so passionate about this work and that's why I know that it will change your life. Someone said to me the other day in my mastermind, I think what they said was I think you could sell screen doors on a submarine, which is a hilarious saying, I think. And I totally laugh.

I mean, number one, that's just hilarious, but number two, that is so not true. I am not a natural salesperson. I could not sell anything other than coaching, I think. I think I seem like a natural when I'm talking about coaching because I believe in it so much. So it's like if I believe food will keep you alive, which I do, so if you're starving and you ask me what to buy to solve your problem, I'm going to sell you really hard on the idea that food is the answer.

If you're like, I don't know, should I try to eat this piece of plastic or should I try to eat some food, I'm going to be like no, dummy, the food. Eat the food. Buy the food. Whoever you're buying it from. Not from me. Just food is the answer to your problem. Whether I personally have food to sell you or not, I'm going to be really convincing that food will solve your problem. That's how I feel about coaching. It's the secret to life.

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Whatever problem you have, I 100% believe coaching is the answer. And that is because I have used it on my own brain and I will keep doing that until I shuffle off this mortal coil, as Shakespeare said. So the reason that I'm giving you this whole digression is that this whole episode is about perfectionism, and I really wanted to frame it this way because sometimes when I talk about perfectionism, those of you who identify with what I'm talking about start to just immediately blame and berate yourselves and give up that you can't change anything.

You get very stuck in like, this is how I am thinking. And I just want to remind you that everything I teach you I know because I did that work on my brain first. So the reason that I am so 100% behind what I teach is that I know that if I can use this work to change, anyone can.

I am not perfect. Neither are you. We are never going to be. We can really just end the episode there. No one is perfect. That day is not coming, but I'm going to teach you more than that.

So, what are perfectionist fantasies? That's what we're talking about today. Perfectionist fantasies and tomorrow thinking. So these are two different terms that I have made up but I think they describe real thought patterns and here's how I think they kind of work together.

So a perfectionist fantasy is a fantasy about being perfect. That's the bottom line. It can be any area of your life. It's believing that if you were perfect in some area, if you lost 20 pounds, if you worked out perfectly, if you never made a mistake at work, if you never yelled at your kids, then you could finally be proud of yourself and happy.

What's really sneaky about this is that often you don't think you're being a perfectionist because your thought isn't oh, I need to be perfect. Your thought is well, I just want to and should work out five times a week, or good parents don't yell at their kids, or I just like my body better when I

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weigh less. You have all sorts of justification thoughts that make your perfectionist fantasies seem like just reasonable goals.

And yet you never achieve them, and usually you don't even try. So, you make elaborate plans to do them and then you never start, or you start and then the minute that you have a setback, you give up. That's because perfectionist fantasies lead to what I call tomorrow thinking.

So tomorrow thinking is when you create a perfectionist fantasy and you tell yourself that you'll start tomorrow or next week or next month or next year. A couple of weeks ago I did that podcast episode on the complaining diet, and one of my students posted in The Clutch that she was going to start it tomorrow. That is classic tomorrow thinking.

A complaining diet literally takes nothing except your brain. You can do it wherever you are, right away. It literally only requires being awake. But perfectionist brain says I'll start fresh tomorrow so I can do it perfectly. Tomorrow thinking is the idea that we will always start tomorrow, so we can do it perfectly, whatever it is.

A diet, creating and keeping a calendar, working out, a morning routine. The very definition of a perfectionist fantasy is that it's a fantasy. It's not a reality. Today is our reality. Tomorrow is always a fantasy. And in your fantasy of tomorrow, you're finally doing everything you "should" be. You're finally perfect, even if you don't use that word for it. It's so seductive.

And then because you have this unrealistic fantasy of perfection, you usually fail almost as soon as you start and you give up, or most insidiously, you never start at all and you just live your whole life using tomorrow thinking. Always thinking that tomorrow you're going to get around to it, tomorrow you're going to get started, tomorrow you're going to finally be perfect.

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And this cycle can become almost addictive where you create a perfectionist fantasy, you indulge in tomorrow thinking, you get a hit of dopamine from imagining what it will feel like to be perfect and finally feel good about yourself, and ironically of course, you create that feeling for yourself now with your brain because that tomorrow is never coming and hasn't come yet, but imagining your perfect future self, you allow yourself to think about feeling good about yourself and that feels good now.

And then you start your plan and fail or you don't even start your plan because you're too scared to fail. So then you start criticizing yourself and feeling bad about yourself, and then the solution your brain has is to come up with another perfectionist fantasy and get another hit of dopamine imagining how you'll be better tomorrow.

So tomorrow thinking leads to not doing anything or trying a little, failing, and giving up, and then what you do to feel better is engage in more tomorrow thinking. Tomorrow thinking is a sign that you are not willing to be present with and love the reality of your today, and it turns into a cycle that can last for years, or even decades. It can become a whole way of life.

Create perfectionist fantasy, indulge in tomorrow thinking, feel good about how perfect you'll be in the future, do nothing in the present, or do a little in the present, but fail to achieve perfection, feel bad about yourself, give up, medicate with a new perfectionist fantasy, indulge in more tomorrow thinking. The cycle starts all over again.

This cycle creates so many unfortunate consequences. First, you lose all integrity with yourself. Your planning and goal setting becomes an exercise in fantasy. You already know when you make a plan that you probably won't keep it, and like any drug, the high goes down over time. So eventually you don't even get the relief you really want because you're already anticipating the disappointment in yourself, you're going to feel because you already know you're not going to do it.

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A lot of my clients have this problem with creating calendars in particular, but any kind of habit really. They do not want to get real about what they can actually accomplish. They create fantasy calendars they can never keep, but they already know when they create them that they're not going to really keep them, and so it doesn't even feel good in the moment anymore.

So first, you lose that integrity with yourself. Your planning is just a joke and you know that. Second, you make it impossible to actually get stuff done because you refuse to create realistic plans you can achieve. We are so addicted to the fantasy that we are unwilling to accept the reality. We want to keep pretending that there's some tomorrow where we're not going to have the human experience and where things won't be hard and challenging and where we will feel perfect.

We would rather plan to do 15 things we can't do and get a dopamine hit the night before, imagining feeling okay about ourselves tomorrow than plan to do the three things we can actually do. We would rather imagine how amazing it's going to feel when we're magically 50 pounds lighter, imagining how we will never have to have negative emotions anymore and we'll always be proud of ourselves.

We'd rather do that while we're watching Netflix instead of taking a walk, or we'd rather imagine when we eat the all raw food diet while we're eating something that doesn't feel good in our bodies now because we'd rather have that fantasy than deal with our own reality. Here's why; it's because we withhold positive feedback from ourselves unless we achieve perfection, which we never do.

So our brain knows okay, well I've told myself I'm not allowed to feel good about myself until I am in that perfect tomorrow, so of course I just have to keep dreaming about it. So we keep making unrealistic plans because in

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imagining that plan, in indulging in our tomorrow thinking, that's the only time we allow ourselves to have any positive emotion about ourselves.

We don't want to create realistic plans with our current reality because we tell ourselves that we aren't good enough as we are, so we don't want to be present with that person. We want the artificial high of tomorrow thinking rather than developing the ability to be proud of ourselves and take pride in our actual current reality and potential real accomplishments.

When I created *Unf*ck Your Brain*, which was my six-month coaching program, I thought the most challenging months might be body image or maybe romantic relationships, but no, it was calendars. The most meltdowns in that group program have always come during the month people have to create calendars for their work.

Calendars are perfectionist kryptonite because they are a written record of your perfectionist fantasy and your failure to live up to it over and over again. What's ironic of course is that it's your perfectionist fantasy that is actually preventing you from achieving and building something real. You are drugging yourself with this fantasy tomorrow thinking in a way that makes it impossible for you to appreciate what you really have and can do now.

So for instance, if you have gotten yourself used to fantasizing about having a \$100,000 coaching business, you will then tell yourself that having a \$50,000 coaching business isn't exciting. So you make unrealistic plans you'll never follow and now you have a \$25,000 coaching business instead, if that.

Perfectionist fantasies may feel good in the moment but the result of indulging in them is that you lose integrity with yourself. Your planning becomes again, totally divorced from reality, you feel like you let yourself

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down and have no follow through, and you are never present with or learn how to accept your actual reality itself.

But you know, like other than that, it's a great idea. It's a very helpful thought pattern other than all those things. So I am going to teach you how to solve this, but I want to address one really important distinction first. I teach all the time that we want - that some of us may want to set big impossible goals, to blow our own minds with what we can do. And I teach that we want to plan them out and I teach that we want to practice living from our future self.

We want to think and learn how to think thoughts we don't currently believe so that we can get different results and achieve different things. We want to dream big and set big goals, we have to plan out what we're going to do to get there, and we have to practice believing in the person we're becoming. We have to practice believing that we can do things we haven't done before and become people we haven't become yet.

And if you don't understand the distinction, you might confuse that with perfectionist fantasy and that happens a lot. Often when a client brings me a big goal that they want to achieve, I have to check with them to see if it's a perfectionist fantasy. So there's a couple of ways to tell the difference. That's what I want to make sure you all understand because it's so important.

So when you're creating an impossible goal, you should feel excited and also kind of nauseous. In my mastermind, we jokingly call it barf club, which is a little bit of a gross name but it's because you should feel a little bit nauseous and scared. You should feel excited but also terrified.

When you are creating a perfectionist goal, when you're just tomorrow thinking, you will feel a different mix of emotions. You will feel good in the

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sense that you get relief from your negative self-talk, you get a hit of dopamine from pretending that you'll be perfect in the future.

So number one, if you're thinking about a big goal and all you feel is good, then that's actually a sign that it's a perfectionist fantasy. If you truly are committed to it and believe it, and are working on believing it, you should feel terrible, but you should feel excited but also like, full of doubt and scared and afraid and confused. If you just feel good, then it's just total fantasy.

Sometimes with the perfectionist fantasy, there will be an undercurrent of negative emotion, but it won't be fear because fear comes from knowing you're going to actually try shit and fail. When you have a perfectionist fantasy, you already know you're not really going to do it. So that undercurrent of negative emotion, it won't be fear. It'll feel more like something heavy, like resignation because you already know you're not really going to do it.

So that's one distinction. Another one is this. If you're setting an impossible goal, you may not know how to get all the way to the goal, but you can see the next couple of steps. So you may not know how to make \$100,000 as a coach, but you do know what you could try to do to make \$500. You are able to plan small chunks at a time and see the next three steps, and you're ready and willing even though you'll probably feel scared to take them.

When you're indulging in a perfectionist fantasy, you are much more likely only thinking about being at the goal. You're thinking about the ultimate magic amount or weight or perfect schedule or whatever it is. You are not looking at small, concrete steps to get there piece by piece. You just want to enjoy imagining this magical land where everything is perfect.

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And what happens is you create a perfect looking plan that requires 100% success. Impossible goals require belief every step of the way. It's super common that a client will tell me what they think is an impossible goal and if I ask, they will say they totally believe it's possible. And then I'll ask if they believe the first little bit they have to do is possible, and they'll say no.

So I keep using this 100K example just because it's an easy, kind of concrete one to look at. A client may say she wants to make \$100,000 as a coach and she says she totally believes she can. And then I say okay great, that means you've got to make \$8000 this month. Do you believe you can make \$8000 this month? And she's like, fuck no. What? Are you crazy? How can I make \$8000 this month? She doesn't really believe.

Or a client says she wants to get married and I say okay, do you believe you can get married? She's like, absolutely. And then I'm like awesome, do you believe you can find four great guys to go out with this month who will like you too? And she's like no, definitely not. Dating is horrible, there aren't enough men, people don't love me.

Or a client says she wants to run a marathon and she believes she can, and I ask her okay, are you ready? Do you believe you can run five miles next week? And she says no. It gets hot, it gets too late and then I never do it. Just all the excuses and the reasons that they can't. When you're indulging in a perfectionist fantasy, you think you believe but you don't really believe.

When you say you believe, what you mean is you intellectually agree that it's conceivably possible for a person like you to do such a thing. This is such a subtle distinction; I'm teaching this at a really high level. If you're new to this podcast, it's totally fine if you don't know what the fuck I'm talking about right now. Listen to it 20 times if you need to or come back to it after you've caught up with the rest of the podcast. That's okay.

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I talk about learning to believe new things all the time. So not believing something isn't necessarily a problem, but with a perfectionist fantasy, it's all or nothing. We claim to totally believe it, but we actually don't believe it at all. When you're working with a true impossible goal that you actually are invested in, you are actively working on believing. You're grappling with your belief.

It should feel hard and challenging and hurt your brain. Perfectionist fantasies are all black and white thinking. You either don't believe you can do it at all or you think that you totally believe it and of course it's going to be fine, because what you really are doing, you're just making the imaginary plan and you believe that the imaginary you that doesn't exist could do the imaginary plan.

Impossible goals mean being in the real grey area work of trying to learn to believe something new and struggling and seeing the next couple of steps and being willing to be in that struggle. Here's the biggest distinction, I think. If you are creating an impossible goal, you are ready and willing to fail and you know that failure is how you will get there.

You are ready to fail forward. You know and expect you will fail the first or second day and you're just going to get up and try again. There's no wagon to be on or off of, there's no streak you're trying to keep consistent. You just are going to keep trying until you get there. You are ready to fail.

If you are indulging in perfectionist fantasy, you are failing ahead of time or you're failing once and giving up. You think failure is a problem. You are afraid to fail. You're engaging in black and white thinking. You create a perfect plan and you don't ever start because you're afraid to fail. Or you start but the minute you fail, you stop and give up.

Impossible goals are fueled and built by failure. Perfectionist fantasies wilt and die and have to be “started over” at the mere hint of it. So that is the

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difference. It's super important to understand and I encourage you to listen to this podcast more than once. It's a really advanced, high-level teaching about this. If you think you understand it, you don't. Go back and listen again.

I had to make sure I understood it when I was writing it. I am all in for your impossible goals. I am not here for your perfectionist fantasies. Okay, now how do we solve them? I have just spent a little while talking about impossible goals because I anticipated that this would be a way your brain would want to be confused or an objection that would come up.

But here's the thing, if you're an over-indulger in perfectionist fantasies, you are not ready for an impossible goal. You don't have any integrity with yourself right now, and that's okay. It doesn't mean that there's anything wrong with you or that you're a bad person. Integrity sounds moral but what it really just means is that you don't have a reliable relationship with yourself.

You can't rely on yourself to do what you say you're going to do. When you say you're going to do something, what it really means is you might do it if the stars align and you'll probably start negotiating with yourself pretty quickly and end up not doing it. Again, not because you're a bad person. It has nothing to do with your value. You are perfect and whole the way you are.

It's actually your self-criticism that has created this mess. Constantly telling yourself negative things about yourself, criticizing yourself is what makes you want to be perfect just to get a respite. Just to get a break from those thoughts. But the result is the same in that you aren't yet able to show up for yourself.

So you really need to start small, and if you're a perfectionist fantasizer, your idea of an impossible goal is probably just a perfectionist fantasy. And

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having a consistent minimum baseline would actually be an impossible goal for you. That's actually something that you've never done before and don't know how to do and would really have to challenge and engage and grapple with to do it.

This podcast is already pretty long, this episode, so I'm not going to do deep in the solution because I've covered it before. So I suggest that you go listen to *Unf*ck Your Brain* episode 36, which is called Antidotes to Perfectionism and Minimum Baseline, and set a small achievable goal like you're going to go to yoga once a week, you're going to make \$1000 in your business this month, you're going to spend 20 minutes reading on weeknights.

Now, this is so important. This is not going to feel good and you have to be ready, you must allow it to not feel good. You are going to experience withdrawal from the addiction to perfectionist fantasies. You are going to miss your tomorrow thinking. It's one of your favorite hobbies. You're going to miss your fantasy life.

You have to give yourself a chance to acclimate. Practicing the minimum baseline, which means making small goals and practicing sticking to them requires you to be present in your own life and to grapple with all of your negative self-talk, and to really do your thought work, to allow for and embrace creating change with small consistent actions.

So make small goals and practice sticking to them. Don't calendar your whole week unrealistically, knowing you'll be behind by Monday at noon. Calendar one hour a day and actually do that thing no matter what. You have to be prepared for your brain to tell you that it's not worth it, it'll take too long, you can't get anywhere this way.

Listening to that brain is how you got here so listen to me instead. Don't listen to your brain. Please, for your own sake, stop making plans that you

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know you won't keep. Every time you do that, you are lying to yourself and the worst part is you already know that. It's an artificial high and it has a shadow side you can feel every time you do it.

It's like smoking a cigarette. Even when you're dependent on nicotine and that part feels good, the part where you're inhaling smoke into your lungs doesn't feel good to your body. So stop doing it, stop pretending, stop lying to yourself. Be willing to experience the discomfort of being present with your actual life and your actual reality.

You probably are shitting on yourself in your reality all the time. Telling yourself constantly that what you are capable of doing now isn't good enough, and then indulging in this fantasy that you'll finally be good enough when you can be perfect in whatever your chosen thing to obsess about is. So this work, this practice of making small plan you can actually stick to, your brain will think it's nothing. It's fucking everything.

It is how you learn to build reliability and integrity with yourself. It's how you learn to stay present in your real reality. It's how you learn to deal with your negative thoughts about yourself and change them because if you're always escaping to a perfectionist fantasy, you never learn how. If you're married and all you do is fantasize about your high school boyfriend, you never resolve what's going on in your actual marriage. That's what's happening in your relationship with yourself.

If you always trying to make out in your mind with future perfect you, you are never learning to love the you that actually exists, which is the only you that you have. The irony is that learning to do this is what is going to allow you to actually become the person you want to be, but you are going to have to work for it one step at a time.

If you have goals for yourself that you are not achieving, I can almost guarantee this is why. And if that's the case, I want you to come join The

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Clutch so that you can learn how to quit this fantasy life and give up tomorrow thinking and learn how to create the life that you want today in your real life. How to actually be here where you are, and that's the place from which you can change your life.

It's www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. Alright my chickens, I will talk to you next week.

If this episode resonated with you, you need to come check out The Clutch. Because once you learn how to coach yourself, we have a whole bonus course called How to Get Really Fucking Organized. It's exactly what it sounds like.

There's a video module and a workbook that walks you through the exact system and process that I used and I still use to build and manage a multi-million-dollar business from scratch, see family, see friends, have time to date, and for hobbies, get to the gym, and still have time to relax and enjoy my life.

If you've ever dealt with overwhelm or stress or overflowing inboxes or endless to-do lists, in other words, if you've ever been a human living in modern times, this course will change your life. And you'll get tons of support from The Clutch community and expert guidance whenever you need it to help you apply and keep applying these principles so that you can implement the system and truly transform your work life and every other part of your life too.