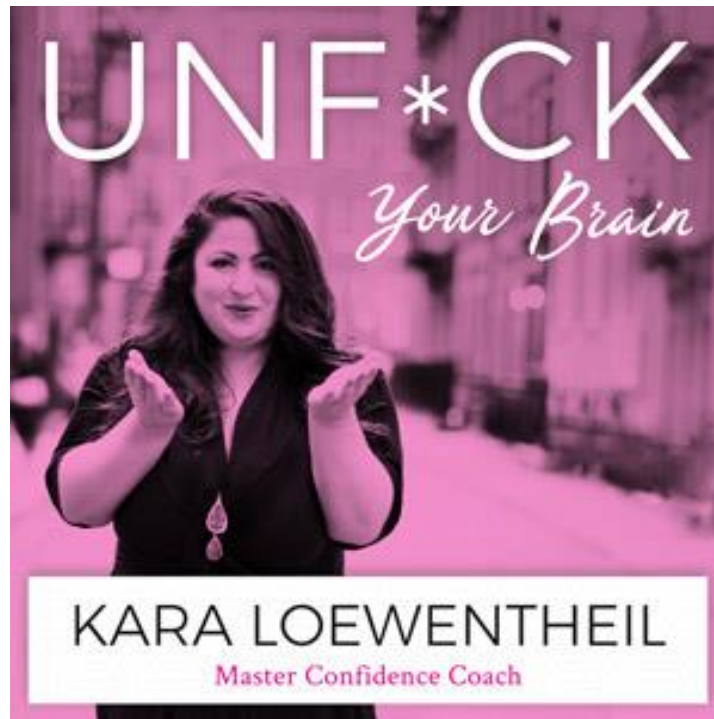


UFYB 183: QA: Phobias, Neutralizing Circumstances & Taking Ownership of What You Want



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *Unf*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard Law School grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello my chickens. It is time for another listener Q&A episode. So on this episode, talking about three things that come up pretty frequently I would say in my coaching. So I think you guys are going to get so much value out of these.

The first one is phobias, like where phobias come from and how we can use thought work to deal with phobias, which is possible. One of my students had a serious spider phobia, arachnophobia, and I will never forget her posting a picture in The Clutch in the Facebook group of her holding a spider and feeling totally chill after she had used thought work to change her thoughts about it. So amazing.

So we're talking about phobias, we're talking about a question that I get a lot, which is sort of like, some version of are some circumstances worse than others, or are some circumstances harder to neutralize than others or to get neutral about.

And one thing that I think is so important, I talk about this in the episode is even the way we talk about our thought work matters because it's just another thought. Something we say about our thought work is itself a thought, an optional thought.

And when people are working on trying to understand circumstances, they will say something like, "I'm trying to neutralize the circumstance, I'm trying to make the circumstance neutral." But that still sort of has embedded in it this idea that the circumstance is not neutral, that it's actually bad and you're trying to get it to be neutral somehow.

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Where you're trying to neutralize the badness. But that's not what I'm teaching, that's not what we're doing. Circumstances are neutral means a circumstance is neutral. Because until a human has a thought about it, it's not good or bad. It just exists.

It's just existing. And then a person has a thought about it and that thought makes it good or bad to that person. And then some people have conflicting thoughts about the same thing. So just for yourself, be careful that you aren't telling yourself I'm trying to neutralize this, I'm trying to get to neutral, I'm trying to make it neutral.

No, it is neutral. Your job is to perceive its neutrality. When you're struggling, it's because what is much more accurate to say is there's a circumstance that I have so many thoughts about that those thoughts are preventing me from seeing its true neutrality. Or those thoughts are preventing me from seeing the way it is actually neutral.

Don't tell yourself that you're neutralizing a bad circumstance. You want to practice believing that the circumstance is neutral because it is, and when you aren't able to see it that way, it's because your thoughts are clouding the lenses. Your thoughts are getting in the way.

Now again, that doesn't mean - I talk about this all the time but I just feel like I have to give this disclaimer any time I use the word neutral. That doesn't mean that we don't choose to have negative thoughts about some circumstances.

When we say they're neutral, we're just talking as a philosophical matter, as an epistemological matter. Let's say tree falls and hurts an animal in the woods. Without a human mind to have a human opinion about it, it doesn't have a human value content of good or bad.

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If it just happened and no one knew or thought about it, it's like a mindfuck of an experiment because even in giving you the example now we're thinking about it. But a tree just exists. And a human has to have a thought about it that would make it good or bad. You might think that tree is amazing and beautiful, or you might think that tree is causing my allergies. The tree itself is just neutral.

So we talk about that, and then I answer this question that is another version of a question I get a lot, which is sort of like I want more out of life but I don't know what. I want my purpose or I want a purpose or I want a big goal, I want to do something big, or I want something more but I don't know what that is.

I answer that in this episode and talk about how to think about that question, which comes up quite a bit. So that's what we're doing on the episode. This was the mini summary of the episode and I'll let myself take it away now and share these questions and answers with you.

So here's this first one. It's a question about fear of flying, but it's going to work for a fear of anything, like public speaking or anything else you're scared of.

“Hi Kara, I absolutely love your podcast. It's already helped me immeasurably. When I have a flight, I get terrified that I'll have a panic attack mid-flight, end up freaking out the other passengers, embarrassing myself, wearing an oxygen mask, and possibly forcing the flight to land. So much catastrophizing. Is the phobia a combo of a few things, like catastrophizing, shame, and people pleasing, or are there other tools to use in a phobia situation? What is my blind spot? Thank you so much for everything you do.”

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Okay, so I have no idea why you've developed this phobia other than your thoughts, but I think even calling it a phobia is not helping you. Because calling it a phobia is making it feel like this very intense, serious thing that is an emergency.

And so I don't think that that's helpful. What we know is that now sometimes when you fly, you have feelings of anxiety in your body. That's really all it is. A panic attack is just anxiety. But what is going on here partly is that you are fearing your own anxiety.

So you create anxiety about having anxiety, which is what a panic attack is. It's when you start to get anxious about even getting anxious and you completely freak yourself out. And this happens with all fears, with fears of public speaking, with anything that you anticipate being scared about.

So the first thing you really have to do is just accept that you're probably going to be anxious. So much of what is incredibly scary about a panic attack is that you are resisting your own anxiety. You don't want to feel anxious; you anticipate feeling anxious, you start to feel anxious, then you start to freak out that you're feeling anxious and you're resisting it the whole time and wanting it to go away.

And that's what freaks you out. If you just knew that every time you flew - let's imagine you just got a headache when you flew. If you just knew every time you flew you were going to have a headache and that's that, you're going to have a headache, not a big deal, it wouldn't nearly be as big a deal.

Anxiety is just a feeling in your body. So the first thing to do is just accept that this is happening and that when you fly, you are probably going to get anxious. Just not resisting it and being willing to have it happen because

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it's going to happen anyway is going to take down the intensity of this so much for you.

The second thing is what you're making it mean that you get anxious. You think it's embarrassing, you're going to freak other people out, you got to work on all of those thoughts. You don't cause other people's feelings. If anyone sees you having a panic attack, the odds are they're just going to feel bad for you.

Not freak you out. And you're the only one who thinks it's embarrassing. No one else is going to thinking that. You're the one who's thinking that. So all of this is just part of the same thing of like, making this this big serious problem.

And what I really recommend you do when you have something like this is you just take down the intensity. Don't call it a phobia. Don't call it a panic attack. Don't sit around hoping it doesn't happen. Don't think about all the things that could happen if it does and resist it even more. Just completely prepare and accept that you're going to be anxious on the flight.

So now what do we do? If we know that you're going to be anxious on the flight, you're going to feel it, it's going to happen and it's not a big deal, it's just a feeling in your body, it's just a sensation in your body, then what do you need to do to prepare?

Just the willingness to be with the reality that you're going to have some anxiety is going to change this up for you. Once you do that, then you can start to uncover the thoughts causing the anxiety. But at this point, most of your anxiety is about maybe having anxiety. So that's what we have to allow and get comfortable with.

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Okay, second question. “Hi Kara. I’ve made a ton of progress on thought work but my brain is tricky.” Aren’t they all? That’s what I would say. She says, “I know I want ‘something else,’ something bigger. I have a feeling I could do more. But all of a sudden, I’m plagued with indecision about what I thought I wanted and it gets unclear. I think perhaps this is an excuse but not sure how to begin to work through it. Where to start?”

Okay, so I picked this because this is such a great example of how we let our brains turn us around and get totally confused. And one of the things I really want you all to think about in your own self-coaching is that the vaguer and more general you are, the less you will have any idea what’s going on.

Sometimes people enroll in Unfuck Your Brain or they come to The Clutch or whatever, they come to me for coaching. And they’re like, “Well, I want to work on my compassion for myself, or my self-esteem, or I don’t think I’m worthy enough.”

And I’m like, yeah, you, me, and everyone else on the planet. We actually can’t work on it on this general level because it lends itself so easily to just whirling around in confusion. So when you tell yourself I want to do something bigger, I could do something more, but then I don’t know what that thing is, you’re living in this land of vagueness and confusion and you’re never going to get anywhere from there.

And it’s not even that it’s an excuse because you don’t even know what you’re asking yourself. You’re just operating at this 70,000-foot level. So what I do when I’m coaching someone and they’re like, I want to work on my self-esteem, I’m like, great, what’s the last mean thought you had about yourself specifically? What was happening? What was the thought you had? Let’s do a model.

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The same thing here. It is not going to be helpful for you to think in these vague terms. You need to get concrete. So you need to decide, what is it that you think you want? And then get concrete about that and then do the thought work around that. Not just sort of think about it in this big picture way.

The other thing that's going on here is that - and the other reason I picked this question is that you are talking about it as though indecision happened to you and what you want happens to you and things just get unclear. So passive. I'm plagued with indecision. What I thought I wanted, it gets unclear.

You're not taking responsibility and ownership for your own mind here. You can't be plagued with indecision. What's happening is you are having indecisive thoughts and you are choosing to indulge those. And you're believing your brain.

So this is what our brains always do. We decide we want something; we're going to go after it, and then our brain immediately is like I don't think you need that, I don't think you really want it, maybe you don't really want it, maybe you want this other thing. And what you're doing, letter writer, or question asker, what we all do is we turn around and make out with our brain about that.

We're like, oh my god really? Maybe I don't really want it. Good point, brain. Gosh, now I'm so confused. You're listening to your brain about that. What you want does not just happen to you. Your preferences aren't just random.

They are caused by your thoughts. Now, mostly they're caused by your unconscious thoughts. But if you decide you want something and you want to go after it, then you have to commit to that. And what that means is not

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engaging in believing your brain when it starts to tell you that it's changed its mind.

Perfectionists love to make big plans. Like I'm going to go on the keto diet and I'm going to run a marathon and I'm going to get a promotion, I'm going to write a book, and I'm going to whatever. And then when we sit down to start, our brain is like, oh, it's too hard, I don't know, maybe I don't want it, fuck the diet industry, and running is hard and nobody reads books anyway and you should be an artist instead.

Our brain just starts up with all this bullshit and then we believe it. We're like, well, now I don't know what I want. You have to decide what you want and you have to commit to pursuing that. And not believe your brain when it starts to tell you that it's changed its mind.

So that's the other reason that you are really stuck is that when your brain tries to change its mind, has thoughts about not wanting the thing anymore, you believe that and then of course you're like, I don't know, it's unclear. I think I want something and then my brain tells me I don't want it and then I'm confused.

As opposed to I'm deciding what I want on purpose and I'm not going to change that. It's taking ownership for what you want, as an emotion created by your thoughts that you control. That's what's missing from the way you're thinking about this.

And it's such a good question because a lot of people struggle with this. And you probably need to listen to that like, 12 times. It's something that a lot of people have a lot of trouble with because we're so used to thinking about what we want as like, it's like the weather, it's what I want or what I don't want.

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But no, we create that with our thoughts. And if we want to commit to wanting to something, going after it, we have to know that our brain will tell us we don't want it and that it's changed its mind and we have to be able to ignore that.

“Do some circumstances require more thought work? I’m trying to really understand how to think about a given circumstance. Take workplaces as an example. Before I knew about thought work, I definitely considered some circumstances to be better. For example, certain work environments felt better because I had more friends there. I’m starting to believe that I could feel good in any work environment, but that the amount of thought work it would require me to do so would vary a lot. And in some sense, that makes me believe that the circumstance isn’t truly neutral because I could for example choose to work in a place where thoughts that made me feel good came to me easily. Does it make sense to think of some things as requiring more thought work, and if not, why not?”

Okay, so this is such an important distinction. I’m so glad you asked this question. Some things require more thought work for certain people. And other things require more thought work for other people.

So when I say some things require more thought work, what all y’all brains want to hear is see, some circumstances are harder than others. But no, some things require more thought work for your brain. And some things require less thought work for your brain. That’s another way of saying it.

The first way I said it was some things require more thought work for your brain, and then some different things require more thought work for other people’s brains. Another way to say it would be some things in the world require more thought work for your brain, and then there are some things in the world that require more thought work for other people, that require less thought work for you.

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The difference isn't that some things are neutral or not or more or less neutral or anything like that. It's that not every brain has the thoughts about every circumstance. So for you, a certain workplace might require more thought work to love because of your brain and all of its factory settings and preconditioning and past experiences and thought patterns.

Whereas for someone else, that workplace could be easy for them to love. So it takes you more thought work to love that workplace than it would take someone else to love that workplace maybe. But it's not because of the workplace. It's because of the brain that's doing the thought work.

And then you could take that same person who has an easy time loving a workplace that you have a lot of trouble loving, and then we could move both of you to some other context in your life, like your body image or your relationships or something else, and you might easily love a partner, that they would have a lot of trouble loving and they would have to do way more thought work on.

So some things absolutely require more thought work than others, but it has nothing to do with the thing. The thing is always neutral. It's that the brain that has to do the thought work is not neutral, is not starting from zero.

We don't have a situation where we have a bunch of neutral circumstances and then a bunch of brains, all of which are starting from a blank slate and with exactly the same capacity and wiring and experiences and it's all the same. No, all the circumstances are neutral and then we've got a whole bunch of different brains that have a whole bunch of different thought patterns already.

And those are the brains that are trying to do the thought work. And so when something kind of triggers a thought pattern that's very ingrained for

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you, it's going to require more thought work for you. But that's not because of the thing itself. And it's not because there's something wrong with you and you just need more thought work than other people.

It's like musical chairs. There's always going to be stuff that for you is less thought work than other people need to do on it, and then for other people there'll be more. It's totally normal and I see that across myself, my coaching colleagues, all my clients, there are areas in my life - I for sure had to do thought work in building my business and making money.

But relatively, it was not so bad. The thought work I've had to do about dating and relationships is like, that is my Everest to climb. That was the work that was the hardest and I still do and of course new stuff comes up in business. I'm not saying it wasn't hard work. It was still hard work; it was like hard work and then even harder work.

Whereas I have colleagues who for sure have had to coach themselves about their romantic relationships and their partnerships, but it's hard work. But then their coaching they have to do about their business or making money is harder work for them. It just depends on who you are and what patterns you have in your brain.

So I do think it's helpful to think that some things require more thought work because if you don't recognize that, then what happens is you're like, it only took me whatever, six weeks to work on my thoughts about that fight I had with my friend, or why is it taking me three months to work on this thought on the thoughts about this fight with my boss or my mother instead? Something's gone wrong.

No, things do require different amounts of thought work from your brain. You can even flip it and just think of it as like, my brain requires more

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thought work on certain C's than others, but it has nothing to do with the C. It's not inherent to the C.

Good question. I'm sure you're not the only one to think about that. "Hi Kara, thank you for all that you do. I'm really trying to wrap my mind around how energy (vibrations) and thought work work together. I know you've mentioned we don't feel love from others, we create it with our thoughts, but how does this model explain instances of instant chemistry or "listening to your heart?" Or when people feel unexplainable physical reactions to others, through things like reiki and other energy-healing modalities? Is it possible that our bodies provide us information before we actually have a thought to help us give it meaning?"

Okay, so there's a lot of different examples mixed up in here so I'm going to go one by one. I don't believe in vibrations in the sense that they are talked about in kind of contemporary self-help. You'll hear people talk about the idea that vibrations are based on physics and there's high and low frequency vibrations. I think that's usually a pretty sloppy bastardization of physics.

In fact, somebody posted about this on my wall and there was this debate going on and one of my friends was like, well, high frequency light is actually usually the more damaging kind. I don't think that people really understand the science. This is not how I think about it.

So you say how do we explain instances of instant chemistry? Okay, I'm not exactly sure what you mean when you say that, but if what you mean is sexual chemistry, or friend chemistry, I think that's created by our thoughts. I think when we meet someone and we're like, I think they're really great, it's because we have the thought I think they're really great.

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So I do think that that is just our thoughts about the person. When I meet someone and I immediately like them, it's because I'm thinking like, they seem really smart, or they seem really cool, or they're really funny, or it looks like we have this in common, or I love their style, or I find them attractive.

Whatever my thought is, that's what's creating that. Just calling it instant chemistry doesn't mean that that's what it is. Or the other example you give here is listening to your heart. Again, I don't really know what that means. I don't know exactly what you mean when you say that but I don't believe that that's a thing.

I think listening to your heart just means you're having a thought. I think when people say they need to listen to their heart, what they usually really mean is they have two different thoughts, they're trying to figure out which one to believe, and then they label one of them as being from their heart, which is fine. I'm not saying that's a problem.

You can use whatever decision-making process you want. But I don't believe that when people say listening to their heart, they are actually naming something that is physical in a way that doesn't involve a thought. I think a more interesting question or not more interesting but just more to the point a little bit is the question of what about things like reiki or other energy-healing modalities.

And I do think some of that is thoughts. Generally when someone is doing physical work on us, we know they're doing it. If you really wanted to test if we could feel it without knowing that, if it really was not from our thoughts, you'd have to test somebody doing energy work without the recipient knowing that the person was doing it and see if they felt anything.

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When somebody is giving us reiki or giving us an energy-healing modality, as the patient or the client, we know that that's happening. And so I think that it is also our thoughts about what's happening, which also explains why some people will go to a reiki practitioner and have an incredible experience and some people will go to a reiki practitioner and have no experience.

Now, to me, I don't think that that means that - I think there's this desire to validate energy work in order to be allowed to believe in it. And I don't think that that's necessary. I'm all about the placebo effect. If I go to someone and they do something and I think that it's working and healing me and it works because I told my body I was healing, I'm all in. I don't have a problem with that outcome.

And then the sort of last question here you ask is is it possible that our bodies provide us information before we actually have a thought to help us give it meaning. I don't know if that's exactly how I would say it. What I believe is that our brain is the organ that all of our sensory stuff has to pass through to be categorized.

Your eyes can't see something without the signals going into your brain for your brain to identify it. When you touch something, your brain is what tells you what it is. So yeah, my fingers are sending my brain information like, I'm touching my desk right now.

I'm touching this thing, this is the temperature, it's sending some signal back but then my brain is the one that's like, drawing on all of its past experience to be like, okay, so that's probably the desk because that's where it is in the room and it has the feeling of this kind of density and in the past, that density has been this kind of material, whatever it is.

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So I do think our bodies - our different sensory systems pull in information. They sense things, whether they're eyes, that's lightwaves, or they're ears, that's sound waves, or whatever it is. Then it's got to go in the brain. That's why if it's in a language we don't understand, then we don't know what it means.

So it has to go through the brain in order to be analyzed and evaluated and categorized. So that is really how I think about it. I just don't really think about energy and vibrations as being - I'm not saying energy isn't real. Obviously, energy exists in the world and I totally believe that there are things that we don't yet know how to explain, that science doesn't yet know how to explain.

And maybe someday they will discover there are high vibrations or whatever else, and that'll be fine too. I'm not particularly preoccupied with the question because I know that whatever I believe about it, I will make come true for myself. So I just recommend that for all of you, you decide on purpose what you want to believe about this and make sure you put that thought in the model and see how it serves you.

I generally don't find that it serves me to believe that other people's energy impacts me. That makes me feel like a victim and like I have to try to control other people in order to feel okay. So whatever your thoughts are about it, you just want to put them in a model and make sure that you like the results.

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