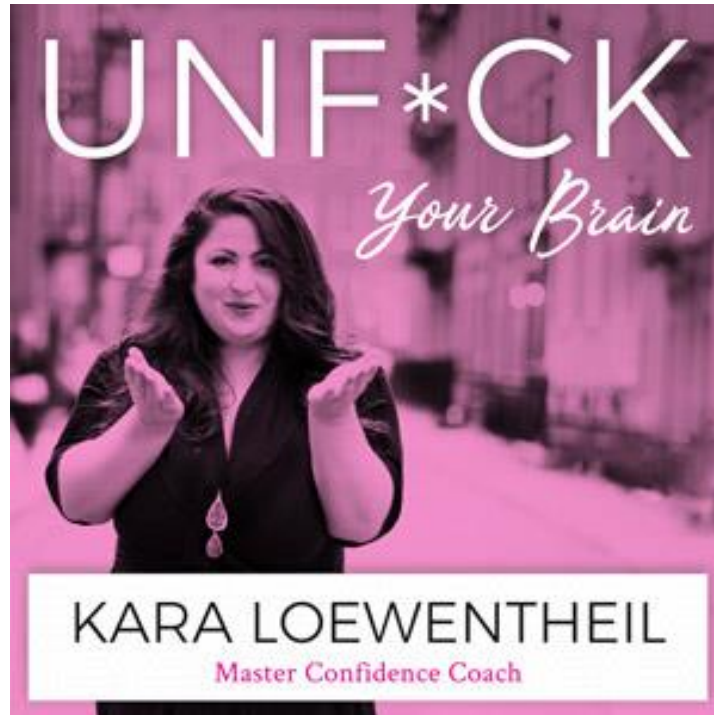


UFYB 187: Greatest Hits Vol 6. Forgiveness & Blame



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. This is a Greatest Hits episode, but I actually have a little additional bonus teaching that I want to tell you guys about. So this is an experience that I had pretty recently, which is that I had kind of decided that - I've been sort of thinking about whether I want to explain this with the details or without, just in terms of what's going to be a better teaching for you.

But I think maybe the details makes sense. So I turned 40 last month, in April, whenever you're listening to this is. You may be listening to it at any time. I turned 40 in April of 2021. And leading up to my birthday, I had sort of made some plans, and then some of the plans changed.

I ended up having an amazing party with friends and family who were able to be vaccinated and we had a gorgeous hotel suite outside in the penthouse suite of this hotel in Williamsburg that was amazing. So that was awesome.

I had made some plans for the day of my actual birthday and then those fell through. And I noticed that my brain got very kind of fixated on what I was going to do with my birthday, who was I going to hang out with, as though it would be sad to be alone on my birthday. That was my brain's thought.

So being a life coach, I was like, okay, if I'm trying to avoid this thing, then I should probably do it on purpose. That's how the brain works, if my brain thinks I shouldn't be alone in my birthday, then probably I should be alone on my birthday and see what I learn.

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So I decided to lean into that, I booked this Airbnb upstate and I was like, okay, I'm going to do my birthday alone, birthday isolation. And then various things started happening, like my friend Clara who you guys will hear on the podcast in a few months lives upstate and she was like, "Let's have dinner."

We decided to have dinner in Woodstock the night before my birthday. Like okay, so my birthday itself I'll be alone. And then my friend Julie, who you'll probably not hear on the podcast because she's not a coach, I do have non-coach friends from back in the day, we're birthday twins.

We have the exact same birthday, same year, same day. We almost never get to spend our birthday together because we're both celebrating with our separate whatever it is, partners or families. She was like, "I don't have plans for our birthday, why don't we get lunch?" So then even though I was upstate and she was in the city, we met in the middle.

And then a couple of other people who I know through coaching who are coaches and becoming friends of mine were like, "Oh hey, we also have just moved upstate, why don't you stop by here and we'll make you birthday cupcakes."

And so through that process of deciding I was like, I'm going to go be alone, and then all these people offering to - inviting me and wanting to spend time with me, I had this breakthrough actually about love in my life and saw how I kept thinking that what I needed to do was spend more time alone, and in fact, what I really needed to do was see how much love was already in my life.

Whenever I was still working through feelings about kind of loneliness or other people or kind of wanting certain relationships to be a certain way, I kept thinking like, what I need to do is be independent, spend more time on my own, as if I didn't already know how to spend time on my own.

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But in fact, what I needed to do was appreciate all the love that was already in my life. So I'm not giving a ton of details on that because that's actually not even the point. That was my little realization for me that I needed in my own self-coaching that actually changed everything for me, but that's my journey.

But what I want you guys to hear and understand is that the reason we move towards discomfort is not because something has to be uncomfortable to be worthwhile. I thought that what I needed was to spend the day alone and just be like, okay, however terrible this feels, I'm here for it.

But actually what I ended up learning was something completely different, which was how amazing it feels to appreciate and accept all the love in your life, and to let that in, and to really feel loved. And to make space for all that love.

So we move towards discomfort because that's just always the right direction to go in. But we don't always know what the lesson is going to be. And I think that is maybe a misconception that some of us have, or I just want to spell that out because it was so powerful to me to see that I didn't actually even know what I needed to learn.

I was completely wrong. I thought what I needed to do was learn to be alone even better, but actually, I'm really good at being on my own. I live alone, I've lived alone most of my adult life, even when I have serious relationships because I like to live alone most of the time. I love my own company, I spend time with myself, I enjoy it.

I don't need to learn how to do that any better. There's nothing wrong with how I do it now, but I don't need to do that more. What I needed was actually to allow and experience and accept all the love that is offered to

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me. But I didn't know that going into it because - this is why having a coach is so important also.

When we're coaching ourselves, we often just think we need more of a thing we don't need more of because that's just the pattern our brain's already in. So this was such a good example for me of moving towards discomfort and then finding out actually, the lesson was totally different than what I thought, it actually wasn't uncomfortable at all, it was amazing.

But I never would have learned any of that if I hadn't moved towards that discomfort. If I had planned the same day of seeing the same people from the thought that, oh my god, I can't spend my birthday alone, that's sad, I need to find people to spend it with, I wouldn't have had this breakthrough at all.

It was only because I was willing to move towards discomfort, I was willing to go do the thing my brain didn't want me to do and feel whatever I was going to feel that I cleared open the space to actually have this incredibly powerful experience of feeling loved and connected and supported and et cetera, all of which is created by my thoughts of course.

But to even be able to be in a space where my brain could produce those thoughts, I had to get there by moving towards the discomfort. So moving towards discomfort and when I teach about that, it's like taking one step. It's like taking the next step towards the thing that makes you uncomfortable, towards the thing that makes you afraid, towards the thing you don't want to do, when the not wanting to do it is coming from fear or scarcity or anxiety.

Not saying if you have no desire to be a lamp repairer you should go do that. But when we're like, I can feel that I'm resisting something or avoiding something or scared to do it because my thoughts about it, that's what we want to move towards and you never even know what you are going to

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create on the other side. You don't even know what kind of learning or transformation is on the other side of that.

So we don't move towards discomfort because we need to suffer all the time. We move towards discomfort because that's how we get to whatever breakthrough it is or whatever learning it is that we need to have, which almost always feels better than the discomfort that preceded it. So that's my pitch for moving towards discomfort today.

And I think it's perfect for this episode, which is about forgiveness and blame. This is one of my greatest hits because it's one of the things that humans struggle with the most.

And I think that moving towards the discomfort we feel when we think about letting go of our resentments, letting go of our grudges, potentially forgiving someone for something we think they did to us wrong, forgiving ourselves, the discomfort we feel in the idea that maybe no one is to blame, or maybe we're to blame, or maybe they're to blame and we're to blame, there's so much discomfort associated with all of this, and forgiveness and blame is such a well-traveled path in our psyche, it can be very uncomfortable to move away from that.

And so I think letting that kind of guide you as you're listening to this, like where do I sense some discomfort in me when I'm listening and how can I lean into that, that is how you're going to get the most learning out of this episode, whether it's your first time hearing it or your 100th time.

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All right. Let's get into it for today.

So it is 2020 now and probably a lot of podcasts are still talking about the New Year and the future that's coming. But you know I like to be contrary,

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so today I want to talk about the past and specifically, I want to talk about how you think about the past and what other people have done in the past, or what you've done in the past.

Because one of the questions I get asked a lot is how to forgive someone who has wronged you, which is such an interesting question because really, the question is how do I change my thought about something that happened in the past?

But let's break it down because it's a thought that people tend to see as a whole other category of thing somehow. Like forgiveness, we think of forgiveness as being not just thoughts, which it is, but a whole different area. So I want to really kind of break down so you can see how it's made up of thoughts.

So if you're thinking about forgiving someone, that means that you're currently having a negative feeling. That's why you're worried about it, that you believe they caused. If you didn't have a negative feeling, you wouldn't think there was anything to forgive them for. You're basically trying to forgive them for causing your negative feeling. That's the bottom line.

You're angry or you're sad or you feel rejected and you want to think about forgiving them for causing that feeling you have. That's what you think. Of course, they didn't cause your feelings, which we're going to get into more. But we just want to start with establishing what it even means.

People will tend to say like, "Oh, I'm trying to forgive someone for how they hurt me." But I don't think that hurt me is really specific enough to help you get into your thoughts because what does that mean? So let's get really specific. Don't just call it hurt. What is the emotion you are feeling when you think about the past?

Is it sadness? Is it anger? Is it rejection? Is it guilt? Is it fear? You want to get really specific. Even when we're talking about physical harm in the past,

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it's still our actual emotional hurt that we become resentful about or have a hard time forgiving.

If you think about it, if you trip over a tree branch and you break your leg, you don't have a hard time forgiving the tree branch. Because your thought about the tree branch is very different than your thought about a person who tripped you so you broke your leg.

So it's always about the emotional suffering, the story that we're telling ourselves, even if we're talking about physical pain because we don't have the same question of forgiveness and resentment and blame and shame around a physical accident that might be caused by an object that we don't usually have trouble trying to forgive.

Our specific feelings are always the window into what we are thinking. When you dial into a specific emotion you are having, that gives us access to what your thoughts are. Because if you want to forgive someone, or even if you don't want to forgive them, what that means is that you have a thought about something they did in the past and you are continuing to believe and think that thought now.

So the first step is always to figure out what those thoughts are. Sometimes we have a thought about a particular action a person took. Maybe they slept with your sister. Maybe they ran off to Hawaii with your retirement fund. Maybe they told you that you were too ugly to love and it had all been a lie. Whatever it is.

The question to ask yourself is so what? So what they did or said this thing? That question will tell you what you're making it mean that this person took this action. What your thought is now about it.

For instance, if you say, "Well, my wife slept with my sister," and I say so what? And you say, "Well, that means she betrayed me and she caused all the pain I felt in my divorce," now we know what it is that you are blaming

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this person for. What negative emotions you have or continue to have that you think their action caused.

Or if you tell me that your business partner ran off to Hawaii with your retirement fund and I say so what, and you say, “Well, now I’m stressed about money and I can’t afford to retire. That’s his fault.” Now we see that you are blaming him or her for their actions and believing that those caused your stress about money.

Or if you say so what that your ex told you that you were too ugly to love and it had all been a lie, and you would say, “Well, because now I’m not confident and I can’t date.” So now we would see what it is the you’re telling yourself. You are currently suffering, that you are blaming on their actions.

So sometimes it is something really concrete and specific that they did. Sometimes I think we more just have a story about a way a person was with us. It’s really like a story about our emotional relationship in the past. It’s really a story about our own thoughts. But we tell it to ourselves as if it’s a true story about what the other person was like.

So we think like, my parents didn’t support me so now I don’t believe in myself. Again, you have to ask, so what? Let’s pretend it’s true they didn’t support you. That’s just an optional thought, but let’s say it was true. So what? So now I don’t believe in myself. Now I’m making my current lack of confidence, which is just my thoughts, I’m making it their fault.

Or my best friend was always jealous of me and she hurt my feelings by not celebrating my successes and wanting me to fail. See, that’s a story about how she just sort of generally was. I say so what, and you say, well now I feel guilty about succeeding. I don’t believe that my friends really care for me.

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Now we can see what is your current thought, your current pain, your current suffering that you're blaming on how this person was in the past. If you say well, my ex gaslit me, and I say so what, and you say well, so now I don't believe in myself. Now we can see what thought pattern you currently have that's causing emotional suffering for you that you're blaming on what they did or what they were like.

It's always a question of what you are making the other person's behavior or your story about their behavior mean. When you are suffering now, because of something you think someone did in the past, you have to remember that you're wrong about why you're suffering. You're not suffering because of what they did or who they were or what they were like.

You are suffering because of your current thought about it. That's it. The past does not exist, except in our minds. I say that a lot and it's the kind of thing that's easy to just sort of nod at, but really sit with it and let it hurt your brain and blow your mind. If you truly try to imagine who you are without your thoughts of the past, if the past did not exist, if you woke up with amnesia tomorrow, your past would not exist to you.

Think about the most consuming stories you have about yourself based on your past, which really just means your own thoughts about the past. Your own story about the past. What would it be like if you woke up tomorrow and you didn't have any of those thoughts?

Your past would effectively cease to exist for you. So imagine that person who you believe caused you so much pain. You'd have none of your thoughts or story about them. Seeing them would not cause you any pain. Thinking about them wouldn't cause you any pain. You wouldn't even know who they were.

And if you really think about it and you kind of dial in, even now without amnesia, the past comes in and out of existence for you as you think about it. You think about other things sometimes too. No matter how focused you

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are on the past, you occasionally go to sleep or get distracted eating something or watching a funny video on YouTube or something.

In that moment that you are no longer thinking about it, the past doesn't exist. And then it flickers back into existence when you think about it again. It's like a hologram that's operated with a light switch. The past is only there when you flick the switch and the electricity starts running and it starts the hologram going.

And then if you turn away and the switch turns off, it's not there. So if the past does not exist, except in the moment we are thinking about it, then the way we can change how we feel when we think about something someone did to us or the way someone was is just to change our thought about it now. That's it.

It really is that simple. I'm not saying it's easy, but it is simple. Asking yourself how can I forgive them is not a useful question. Because it's like you're asking your brain to come up with some complicated solution that it doesn't even know how to do when the solution is really I have to change the thought I have about what they did or how they were and why it's a problem.

And one thing that's important to pay attention to is that you may have thoughts not just about the thing you're having a hard time forgiving, but about what you make forgiveness itself mean. If you tell yourself that forgiving someone else means that, "what they did is okay," that meta thought is going to get in the way.

I call this a meta thought because it's like your thought about the thought. You have to resolve that thought first or you'll never make traction on the underlying thought. If you have a thought about why it's not a good idea or why it's not okay to forgive someone, or forgiving them means you're a doormat or what it means to forgive them that you haven't resolved, then you can try rewriting your story about them or what happened as much as

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you want and thinking new thoughts, but you have unconscious drag on the process.

If the anchor of a boat gets caught in something, then it's pulling on it and slowing it down below the surface. If you have not looked at your thoughts about forgiveness and what it means and whether you really want to do it and why or why not, if you haven't dealt with all of that, then even trying to change your thoughts to forgive someone probably won't work because you haven't resolved this unconscious drag about the whole concept.

And we have a lot of less than useful thoughts about forgiveness is what I find. For instance, we think that it makes what the other person did okay. That's a thought we have. If I forgive them, it means what they did was okay.

But here's the good and bad news. What they did was okay, or it was not okay. It was both and neither. It had no objective essential okay-ness or not okay-ness. A rock is not okay or not okay. It just exists. Whatever actions were taken in the past, it's only our own thoughts that make them okay or not okay.

Your resistance to them, your own thought that they were not okay is only causing you pain. It's not being registered with some universal entity in a big ledger of what was and not okay. It's not changing the past. It's not making the other person involved feel anything. Sometimes the other person is not even alive anymore.

It's only causing you suffering. It's like that saying that hatred is like taking a poison and expecting the other person to die. Resentment is like that, holding a grudge is like that, blame and shame are like that. Holding onto your belief that changing your thought about what happened would make it okay is just making you feel not okay now because you're thinking thoughts that cause you pain and suffering and don't do anything to anyone else.

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So that's one reason we struggle with forgiveness sometimes is what we make it mean and we think that forgiving someone else has anything to do with evaluating their behavior or making it okay or not okay. The second reason I think we sometimes struggle with forgiveness is that we think that someone has to be to blame.

So if we forgive the other person, then we're going to blame ourselves. I think any time we are strenuously blaming someone else and very attached to them being wrong, it's usually because we think the alternative is that if they're not wrong, then we did something wrong. And so we will have to blame and shame ourselves if we aren't blaming and resenting them.

So if you're unable to forgive yourself, let's say, for someone cheating on you, is it because you secretly fear that you did something to make it happen? If you're unable to forgive someone for firing you, is it because you secretly fear you were fired because you were bad at your job? Probably.

You get the idea. It might not be those specifically, but you have to look at why you're so attached to not forgiving someone. And often it's because you're making forgiving itself mean something and then often, it's also because you're making absolving them of blame mean that you must be to blame instead.

But no one has to be to blame because the idea that something went wrong or was bad or shouldn't have happened is totally optional and subjective. It's like we're willing to change our thought about who is to blame for the bad thing, but we don't realize that our belief that the thing was bad is also optional and subjective.

It's a human thought created by a human mind. It's not the law of gravity. There's no physics that tell us the laws of bad and good. These are evaluative, moral concepts made up by human minds and they differ across time and societies.

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And I think ultimately, this connects to the most challenging aspect of forgiveness, which is often self-forgiveness. Part of the reason we struggle with forgiving others is that we are unable to forgive ourselves. We're so attached to our own self-judgment that we then have to judge others harshly as well.

When your brain is in the habit of judging you, it's in the habit of judging everyone else too. So the beauty of understanding that thoughts create feelings, which create actions is that you can see that you and everyone else are just always living in some point of that cycle. Not in a bad way.

Whatever anyone else did in the past was just caused by whatever thought, feeling, action cycle was happening for them. And whatever you did in the past was caused by your thought, feeling, action cycle. Your current experience of forgiveness or non-forgiveness is caused by your current thought, feeling, and action cycle. That's it. That's all there is.

Humans with thoughts that cause feelings, that cause actions. All the rest of it is our stories about what that means. We evaluate those cycles and we decide who's good and bad and who's nice and mean and who loved us and who hurt us and who is worthy and who is not. But those thoughts cause so much suffering and they are so optional.

So if you want to liberate yourself, I want you to consider forgiving the people who you think have wronged you, not because you should, not because you have to, not because it makes you a better person, not because they deserve it. It has nothing to do with any of that. Just because it will allow you to free yourself.

And I want you to consider forgiving yourself. All it takes is changing your thoughts about the past and that will change your life. If you want help learning this step-by-step process to changing your thoughts, that's what you can learn in an interactive way in The Clutch, in a way that I can't teach on a one-way podcast.

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