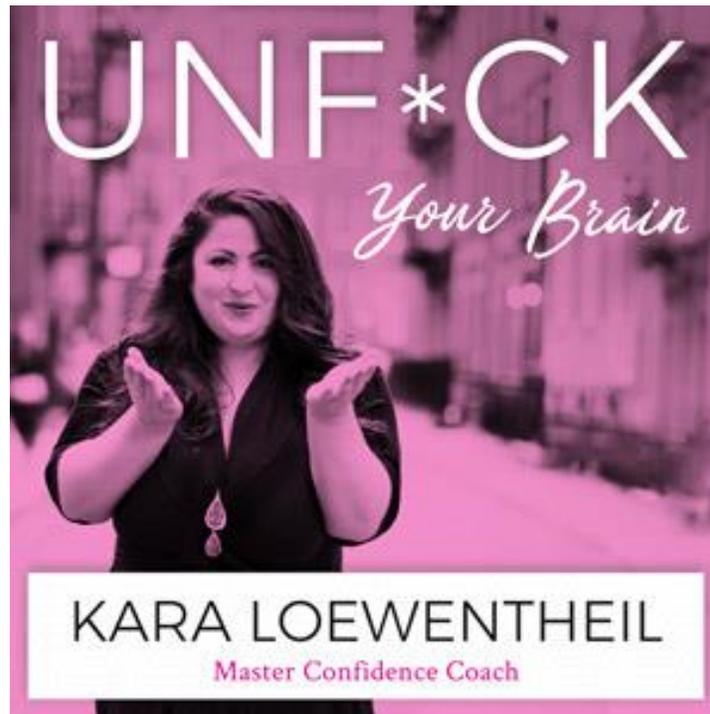


**UFYB 191: Greatest Hits Vol. 7
When You Feel Triggered**



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. How are you? I am a little tired but amazing. For some reason I thought it was a good idea for me to fly home from California after not traveling for the entire pandemic, I mean, not that it's over, but not traveling for about 14 months.

I then went to California for 10 days. I had a friend's wedding I went to in Napa, my friend Stacey Boehman who's been on the podcast. And then I saw some other dear friends I hadn't been able to see for a year, which is amazing. But my nervous system was definitely like, what is happening? Where are we? What time is it? Who are all these people? Why are we talking to so many people?

And then I came home and apparently past Kara had thought it would be a good idea to just finish my workweek and then teach a full weekend retreat and then have a day full of meetings on Monday. So I basically have forgotten everything about traveling and how to travel.

Forgot about jet lag, I forgot about how to schedule myself when I get back, I forgot how to pack, I forgot I always break a nail when I travel, so really just reliving, getting back used to my pre-pandemic life. So that is what I have been up to.

And then I had the living room retreat, which was the smallest coaching event I've ever done actually, I think. It was only 10 or 11 women and we just hung out for two days and coached nonstop. Even my brain was tired by the end. I was like, I've blown my own mind so many times.

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I feel like one of the big things that came out of it is something I talk about in the episode on the takeaways from Clutch College, but seems like I can't reinforce it enough, which is that there's this tendency when we get really into thought work, I think to see self-love as this destination that we're going to get to.

When we achieve self-love, when we arrive at self-love, then everything's going to be better, everything's going to be perfect. And we think of it as this sort of goal, like we're going to get to the island of self-love. And then it just is like, we're constantly like, am I there yet?

Evaluating if we're there yet, thinking there's something wrong with us if we're not there, looking for evidence that we're not there, and I really recommend that you reconceptualize what self-love is. It's just a relationship with yourself.

So just like your relationship to anyone else in your life is an ongoing living, breathing thing, it's created by your thoughts, but it's not like a destination. It wouldn't make any sense to be like, I just want to get to the point where I love my friend. I get to friend love island and then I'm done.

That's just not how we think about it, right? When you love someone in your life, there are times they might annoy you, there are times even you might be angry at them, there are times you think they're amazing. But you love them, you have their back, you're not going to criticize them all the time, you're not going to abandon them at the earliest opportunity, you're not going to take everyone's else side against theirs and agree with any harsh thing anybody else says about them.

You're in a relationship with them. Self-love is just your relationship with yourself and you can work on over time making that relationship more compassionate, more loving, kinder, more fun for you. But it's a process.

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And it'll be going on our whole lives. We'll always be in relationship with ourselves.

So it's not a destination that you get to. It's not a state of being that you achieve or gets unlocked. It's just an ongoing relationship with yourself and taking care of that relationship with yourself, just like you put energy and time and thought into taking care of your relationships with your friends and your family and your partners and whoever else is in your life.

It's just a relationship to yourself. And I think that when we frame it that way, it becomes so much less dramatic and so much less of a kind of thing to achieve. And the truth is there's nothing we can achieve - I talk about this all the time but I'm reliving it myself right now.

There's nothing that we can achieve that is an exit ramp off the human experience. I am right now in my own life experiencing that kind of last thing that even though I'm a coach and even though I knew theoretically that it wouldn't be like this, the last thing I wanted to experience or have that I was like, "But this is going to be a game-changer, right?"

Okay, sure, I'll sometimes still be upset, life is 50/50, but I'm still going to feel dramatically different and validated, right? And I got to tell y'all, no, it's not how it works. Literally, your dream can come true, the dream you never thought you could have can come true.

And you may feel, if it's something you had to do work to achieve, proud of yourself and a deeper level of self-belief and deeper level in your relationship with yourself, which is totally awesome. But it's not life-changing.

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If you are doing the work and you have a good relationship with yourself, nothing out there really makes it that much better. And same if you have a terrible relationship with yourself because you'll just look for what's terrible about it.

So there just is no exit ramp off the human experience. Even as a coach, I'm still sometimes like, but that one thing, that would really do it. And whatever it is, for some of us it's getting a certain kind of job, for some it's having a certain kind of body, for some of us it's being in a certain kind of relationship, for some of us it's having a certain breakthrough with our parents, or for some of it's, I don't know, winning the roller derby national championships.

Whatever it is, I am here to tell you the only downside of self-love is that external validation just doesn't really do much anymore. But the upside is that external validation doesn't do much anymore. You're not on that rollercoaster. You're not getting that high and that crash.

Anyway, so this all relates I think in a sense that today's podcast that we are sharing again because if I had to distill what thought work is, honestly, down to its basics, it would be what do you do when you feel triggered? And I'm using triggered in the kind of colloquial non-trauma sense here.

It's a term from trauma discourse that has gotten just applied to everything now and has almost completely lost meaning because people use it to mean I had a thought or a feeling, I had a negative emotion completely outside of an actual trauma or an actual PTSD diagnosis or experience.

But we just use that word, we could say when we feel upset, when we feel threatened, when we feel angry, when we feel jealous, when we feel sad, just when all of a sudden, a negative emotion comes up based on

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something that we think about something that someone else did or said, or something we heard, or something we saw, or even a thought we have.

If you took nothing away from thought work other than when that intense negative emotion happens, the best thing I can do is be curious about what's causing it and learn more about myself. That's kind of the essence of the whole endeavor.

That's really it. The whole endeavor of thought work is how do I get more curious about what I'm thinking and how do I take responsibility for my own thoughts and feelings. And how you respond when you feel "triggered" is that question. That's how we know if we are taking responsibility for our own thoughts and feelings. That's how we know if we are looking internally or externally to solve our problems.

I'm at the point in my life which is so interesting that I used to try to control people to alleviate my own anxiety. We all do this. And some of us do it in extreme ways and some of us do it in mild ways that we can almost get away with, where we just sort of are telling people in our lives kind of how we want them to act.

Like I want you to text me this way, or I want you to plan this kind of outing, or I want you to ask more questions, or I want you to not email me at this time but email me at that time, whatever it is. We're trying to control other people so that we feel better, which only ever works momentarily.

I'm now at the point I realize where trying to control someone else actually gives me anxiety. I can feel so strongly that even if I'm feeling a little bit anxious and my brain is like, hey, you should try to control this person to feel better, if I even think about actually trying to do that, my anxiety gets so much worse because I'm so sensitive now to what it feels like when I try to control someone else and how that actually increases my anxiety.

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And so that's such a sign I think that if you do this work, then when you have that triggering feeling, you know now eventually intuitively, you have to turn inwards and it becomes automatic for you to kind of look at yourself and look at what's going on in your own mind. And it will actually feel worse if you try to externalize it and control other people. So I just find that so fascinating. My brain has totally flipped.

So no matter how many times you've listened to this episode, listen to it again. It really is kind of the essential element of what thought work and self-inquiry and self-responsibility all entail. So I hope that you enjoy.

—

Today's topic for the podcast is kind of one of the biggest barriers that comes up to transformation for all of us in our own self-coaching and that kind of gets in the way of what we can learn as a human in this world, and that is our reactivity.

So before I want to dig into this topic, I want to be really clear, because I get a lot of emails from you people sometimes. I am not talking about triggering in the PTSD sense. So when someone has experienced trauma and has post-traumatic stress disorder, which by the way, some people experience trauma and do not develop PTSD.

PTSD does not mean you had trauma. It's not one to one. PTSD is a specific diagnosis for a specific syndrome that some people experience after trauma. There's so much misinformation and misuse of these terms, especially in the faux-empowerment world kind of. So I really like to try to be clear about this.

PTSD is a diagnosis. It is a syndrome, a disorder, whatever you want to call it, it is a cluster of mental health symptoms that we have given a name to

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that some people develop after trauma, not everyone. So, if you do have PTSD, certain things can trigger your trauma response to reactivate.

Now, people are also very confused about this because a lot of people assume and talk about triggers as though they are very predictable. But one of the hallmarks of trauma reactivation is that triggers can be unpredictable. So some might be predictable. I'm not saying they never are. But some are very unpredictable. That's why PTSD can be so challenging for people.

So the non-trauma educated public tends to talk about it in just a lot of incorrect ways. So, in any case, that is not what this episode is about. So I am not talking about people who have PTSD and experience trauma reactivation from PTSD triggers. When I use the word triggering in this episode, that's not what I'm talking about. I can't be any clearer than that; that's not what I'm talking about.

When I talk about, "Triggering" in this episode and I'm usually going to say quote, end quote, I'm talking about the tendency that some of us have to use this word to stand in for any strong emotion that we feel when we experience something or hear something or see something or even think something that creates negative emotion for us. And the conflation with actual PTSD and post-traumatic triggers is not helpful, so I'm trying to be really clear about it.

Now, this podcast is not about PTSD triggers. I'm not saying that if you do have PTSD, this podcast won't be helpful for you, even if you do have PTSD, you also just probably have some strong negative emotions as a human that are not related to your PTSD, and this episode totally applies to those. So I'm not saying turn this off if you have PTSD because nothing in here applies to you. I'm just saying this episode isn't about PTSD triggers and when I use the word triggering, that's not what I'm talking about.

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It's really about the way that we misuse what is a technical term and apply it to any time we have a strong emotion that is nothing to do with PTSD or PTSD triggers. So if we don't have PTSD, what we're describing when we say we feel triggered is that we are having a strong negative emotion and we want to get away from it.

Sometimes we use it to mean that something is sort of "Activating" sensitive points or touchy areas for us or hitting on thought and feeling patterns that we have from past experiences. But it's so important not to invent too many categories for your thoughts and feelings because it mystifies your own brain to you. It's just thoughts and feeling; that's it.

Something happens, you have a thought, you have a feeling. You may not be aware of the thought. You might just experience this strong feeling. But the thought is always there and that's all that's happening. And part of the problem in correctly using words like triggered when we don't have PTSD and we're just describing intense thought and powerful feelings for us is that we sort of co-opt the real meaning of that term and we turn our own thoughts and feelings that we can learn to change into some kind of syndrome that's beyond our control.

It makes us this thing outside of ourselves that we treat with kid gloves and we think we need to build our lives around avoiding just because we have a strong emotion when it comes up. And, I mean, I have a whole episode about trauma and that attitude can be detrimental even when you do have PTSD, but it's for sure not helpful when you don't.

So when you have a very strong emotional response to something, it is natural to want to blame the thing and get away from it. Your brain thinks the threat is outside of you so it tells you, you need to protect yourself from whatever's outside of you. So your brain immediately goes into blame and avoid mode. Blame the thing outside of you and then try to avoid it.

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And it can be insidious because it can even seem like self-care. We see all these memes about cutting toxic people and situations out of your life to take care of yourself. But when you avoid something or someone just because you have a strong emotion, I don't believe that's really caring for yourself. It's like using booze or drugs or food to numb out as a way of caring for yourself.

It's not that it doesn't work at all. It does help in some ways or we wouldn't keep doing it. But it's not what true self-care looks like because it's just avoiding the problem or drowning out the thought rather than working through it.

And the same is true when you avoid something that you think triggers you or you try to change it so you will feel differently because what happens when you do that is you miss so much opportunity for learning. I've been thinking about this a lot in two areas of my life recently, which is why I decided to do this episode about this; one where I'm being "Triggered" and one where other people think that I'm triggering them. So I'm going to give you both of those examples so you can see it from both sides.

So I had this experience very intensely the other day for myself where I had a miscommunication with someone that I don't know very well yet and it "Triggered" a lot of anxiety for me. It was like the very neutral circumstances, I sent a text that had a question mark at the end and I didn't get a response in the time that I decided I should get one and my brain lost its shit.

So I am a master coach. I know that the circumstance is completely neutral. My brain was going crazy having such intense anxiety and it was so fascinating to observe because the urge to try to fix it by trying to change the circumstance was so strong. My brain was completely convinced that the problem was that this person was not acting the way

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they should and that the way to feel better was to take some action to change the circumstance.

My brain wanted me to text the person a follow-up, ask them to answer the question, yell at them for not answering the question, or preemptively make some change or say something based on everything I thought about them not answering the question, there were so many actions my brain wanted me to take.

I could have done that. And hilariously, when we cleared up the miscommunication, it turned out actually nothing was wrong, the person literally thought they'd sent the response and hadn't. And they were kind of perplexed by why I didn't follow up.

They were like, "Obviously I would answer that question, just text me and say you didn't answer my question." But the reason that I hadn't followed up was exactly because I was feeling so "Triggered." I was having such intense anxiety.

Whenever I want to act my way out of a feeling urgently, I know that means there's work for me to do. So I didn't want to just fix it by following up. And, of course following up might not have "Fixed" it or my feelings, all depending on what happened next and what I thought about it. But I didn't even want my emotional state to depend or to be linked to what happened next.

I want my emotional state to be based on my own thoughts and feelings and on digging into what's going on with me. So I didn't text them to clear it up on purpose. I took a walk, I paid attention to my thoughts. I came home. I did some thought work. I even had a coaching session. I used that to work more deeply on the issues that I was bringing up.

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It was terrible, I'm not going to lie. I'm like any other human. I do not love the feelings of intense anxiety and dread. And I had a full day of work I needed to do on top of all this self-work on this topic, which I did. I did both because I keep my calendar.

But I am so glad it happened because, in the end, while everything was totally fine with the person, I was able to get to a place before we spoke where I knew it would be fine either way because I managed my own mind and I learned so much from that. I saw how my desire to know the future was causing me a lot of distress and anxiety. I got a whole podcast episode out of that, that was last week.

And because I got really present with my thoughts, later, when we resolved the miscommunication and I discovered nothing had been wrong and I learned the true story about what was going on, I was able to really see just how insane my brain had been. Like, that's the thing, when we rush to get away from a negative thought, we don't really spend time with it and really get to see what's happening.

I spent the whole day with my own crazy and so I just got so rampant. It was unpleasant, but I stayed with it, and that meant, when I did resolve it, when I did find out what was really going on, I had such an amazing history of what my brain had come up with that day. Whereas if I had rushed to get the answer right away, I would have missed out on all of that.

Yeah, I might have skipped some of the suffering, although, when your brain's acting crazy, we all know you can reach out or get a response or whatever and you'll still feel crazy.

But I wouldn't have gotten to know, like I wouldn't have gotten the power of seeing how elaborate my thought process had been at creating nothing, like creating everything out of nothing, like how many insane ideas I had

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made up. But because I was willing to sit with it, I got to experience that and see from that.

And I got this podcast episode out of it too. I've gotten so much learning for myself and to teach out of being willing to be with those thoughts and feelings and to not try to act to change them even though I felt very "Triggered" and it would have been easy to reach out to try to fix it, or to be like, "This person doesn't act the way I want. It's triggering for me. I feel terrible. I can't experience this. I'm going to cut them out."

I got so much out of it because I was willing to get curious with myself rather than assume my thoughts were true and act my way into feeling better. So much thinking and learning and growth happened all because when I felt "Triggered" I didn't reach out to change my circumstance. I reached in to learn more about what was going on with me.

I didn't try to manage the other person's behavior and tell them how they had to act and badger them until I got some resolution for myself from the outside. I went inwards instead to see what was going on with me.

I have also experienced this from the other side, which is equally fascinating. Well, I'm sure I've been on the other side of some texts that have made people crazy, that their thoughts made them crazy about. But that's not what I mean here. This is a different example of being the "Triggering" thing to someone else, again, not in the PTSD sense.

People frequently write me or comment on social media posts about things that they don't like that I do. And I'm so fascinated by that thought process and what thought and feeling creates that action. But I see this come up a lot and I think it's another great example of what you miss out on when you just go with that triggered feeling and take action to try to change it instead of getting curious.

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So, for example, I'm actually going to give you two examples of this; one where I'm the "Triggering" thing and then vice versa, an experience I have had with my teacher. So, for instance, I see this come up a lot where I'm the teacher with listeners or followers or even students who get upset that I talk about The Clutch on the podcast, which again, I think is so fascinating.

Because, what happens is, someone hears me talk about The Clutch and then they have a negative feeling about it and then they think, if they come tell me about their negative thought and feeling, that they'll feel better. They think if they just get it – it's like we want to spit out the emotion onto someone else.

We think if we get it out of ourselves and onto the other person then we'll feel better. I guess maybe they think I'll change my behavior to change their feelings, which of course I won't because, number one, that's not my style, and number two, it won't work because I don't cause anybody's thoughts and feelings except for my own. Or they don't even think that but they just think somehow they'll feel better, again, if they spit out that emotion.

We just have such a bias towards thinking, if I just take action – like think about the word trigger. Like, what does a trigger do? It, like, pulls something back and then releases it. We get triggered to act. We think if we act then we will feel better.

And what's so interesting is that when they take that action of, like, sending me the email or commenting on the social media post, whatever it is, where they're trying to act their way out of that feeling, they're missing out on such powerful questions to ask themselves about why they're feeling that way.

Let's just stick with this example of me talking about The Clutch on the podcast. Why is that so upsetting? If I didn't have a coaching business and I just took advertising, like from Blue Apron or Brooklinen or something –

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whatever podcast I listen to, all I hear is Blue Apron or Brooklinen, it's very well-targeted to me. Not Blue Apron, but I have Brooklinen sheets.

Anyway, if I just took advertising, nobody would bat an eye, right? Podcasts do that all the time. We all understand that nobody can create and put out free educational or entertainment under conditions of capitalism, which we live in, without getting paid somehow, so people take advertising.

And I could totally do that. I get approached to take advertising all the time, by big companies. And I never do it because I don't want to advertise anything to my listeners that I don't know 100% for sure will benefit you and change your life.

I like nice sheets, but I'm not sure they change your life. But coaching does. It's only my own coaching work that I can be that sure about. But this is such an interesting question, right? Such an interesting learning opportunity. Why does it bother someone to hear me sell The Clutch but it wouldn't bother them to hear me sell Blue Apron to sponsor the podcast?

Just that one question can open up so many interesting thoughts that person has about who should help people and what does help look like and how are people allowed to make money and when is it okay to promote yourself and when is it okay to promote your business and what are people allowed or owed or entitled and how do we respond to our own thoughts and why are they uncomfortable with me promoting my own work?

There's like so many interesting thoughts there, all of which is just cut off when you just act to stop the thing that you think is triggering you. Similarly to when people are upset that I curse on the podcast. I hear about that a lot too, that if I would just stop cursing then they could feel better, they wouldn't feel triggered and they could learn from the podcast.

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And all that possible learning for you gets cut off when you just act to try to stop the thing you think is triggering you. Just like if I had sent a text to be like, “Hey, hey, hey answer my question,” I would have missed all that learning. Maybe it would have been successful. Maybe I would have gotten an answer but what would I have missed out on?

One of the recent comments I got about talking about The Clutch, the person said they fast forward whenever I mention The Clutch so they don't have to listen to it. And I was just like, that's so amazing. I see how that seems like an action that will solve your problem. It's totally rational in that sense. But it's literally the exact opposite of thought work.

It's avoiding a circumstance because you don't like the feeling you have when you encounter it and it's like the opposite of taking responsibility for your own thoughts. This came up for me a lot when I got certified as a coach because – I mean, my coach and teacher also talks about things she sells on her podcast, but that didn't bother me because I didn't have thoughts about that.

But, my teacher is a weight loss coach. She's not just a weight loss coach, but she does coach a lot on weight loss. And especially in the beginning, when I first met her, she was doing I would say even more of that. And even when I went to get certified with her, there was like a whole day on weight loss. And I don't teach weight loss.

And I was at the beginning of my body positivity journey and my thoughts and feelings were actually much less secure about it than they are now. So it was very “Triggering,” right? Like, meaning I had a lot of thoughts and feelings come up being in that room and listening to these ideas and these teachings that I didn't agree with.

And I am so fucking grateful to myself that I leaned into that discomfort and I was willing to have it because, number one, I actually got so much more

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than I – well, I didn't lose anything, but I got so much out of that training, my whole life has changed because I got certified as a coach and learned this work so it was so worth it.

And I actually got much more clear on what I believed by engaging with those ideas. And by engaging, most importantly, with my own thoughts and feelings about them, by going inside. I could have gone to get certified somewhere else or not gotten certified at all or left the room during that day. And I didn't do any of that because I never want my own emotional stability or peace of mind to depend on what other people are thinking or saying or doing, right? I never want that to be the determining factor.

If there's one thing that I know for sure, it's that the reason that I have created such a successful business and I have had such personal transformation is because I committed early on to leaning into that discomfort. In the beginning of this journey, so many things "Triggered" me, meaning I had a lot of negative emotion around them. Like, I don't put it in quotes to mean it's not an intense experience. It is. But it's always your own thoughts.

My commitment was always to move towards that emotion, not away from it. I used to constantly think – I used this thought so much in the beginning – whatever else, I'm going to learn something from my mind about this experience. Whenever I felt an intense swing of negative emotion, whether it was something my teacher said or something someone in my family did or going to an event I was dreading or someone on Facebook saying something I didn't agree with politically, whatever it was, my thought was always, "This is going to be intense and possibly unpleasant, but whatever else, I'm going to learn something about my mind from this experience.

And because I believed that, it was always true. I always leaned into the discomfort and the negative emotion and I got curious about it. So that is

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what I do when I feel “Triggered,” I lean in. I get curious. I sit on my hands, sometimes literally.

I don’t just take action to try to get out of it. I don’t change my circumstance. I don’t tell someone else to change their circumstance or their behavior. I breathe and I lean in and I commit to learning whatever the experience can bring me, no matter how it feels.

Just think about a deep tissue massage. If you have a trigger point in your body that’s painful, you have to be willing to experience the discomfort of pressure on it in order for it to release. When somebody releases a trigger point – I just had someone release one on me yesterday, and it was excruciating for like three minutes while they were doing it. Afterwards, it was so much better.

But if I had avoided it and not ever touched it myself and not let anyone else touch it because it hurt, I would never have gotten that release. It would just get tighter and tighter and tighter.

So when you are feeling “Triggered,” I want you to get curious. Don’t act out, lean in. See what you can learn. If you want help doing that, come join The Clutch because it is the one place where we will not just validate all of your painful thoughts. Instead, we will help guide you so you can learn how to lean in safely and actually learn something about yourself and how to change your life. Unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch.

If you’re loving what you’re learning in the podcast, you have got to come check out The Clutch. The Clutch is the podcast community for all things Unfuck Your Brain. It’s where you can get individual help applying the concepts to your own life.

It’s where you can learn new coaching tools not shared on the podcast that will blow your mind even more. And it’s where you can hang out and

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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 your life, I guarantee it. Come join us at www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. That's [unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). I can't wait to see you there.