

**UFYB 196: You Can Have It All
- But What Does “All” Mean?**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB 196: You Can Have It All - But What Does “All” Mean?

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.

Kara: Hello my chickens. I'm so excited for this conversation today. We are going to have - it includes people who were formerly chickens or who began as chickens at least, one who did my Unfuck Your Brain small group back in the day, and now is an amazing, certified coach herself, and several other coaches.

So I'm going to introduce you to these four amazing coaches, all of whom went through my Advanced Certification in Feminist Coaching and are either certified or in the process of getting certified with me. And we are going to be talking about something that I feel like is one of those topics that gets rehashed over and over again in the media without anything new really being said, which is how people and especially women or fem-oriented people can “balance” their career with everything else they're doing in their lives.

And we all know this is a super gendered questions that nobody even talks about with male CEOs. So all of these coaches have their own perspective on that question and we are just going to have a really interesting, lively conversation about it.

So I would love for each of you to introduce yourself, so I'm just going to - let's start with you Amanda. As the original OG Unfuck Your Brainer who's been with me the longest, tell the people who you are.

Amanda: I am Amanda Ryan Fear, and I am a dream doula for women in their 40s and 50s who have spent most of their lives checking off all the boxes of success and now instead of enjoying that success, they just feel

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overwhelmed, unfulfilled, and anxious. So I help them birth the big dream that they've been hiding from the world and sometimes from themselves.

Kara: Dream doula. That is amazing. You're just there in the little water tub of people's lives and dreams. I don't know, when I think about a doula, I always think about a home water birth. I don't know why.

Amanda: One of my clients said that. She's like, you're like a dream doula. And I was like, yes, that is me.

Kara: Time to update my business cards. Alright, awesome. Linda, what about you?

Linda: It's fun that you picked me next because I'm a high-risk OB by trade. So this whole water birth at home thing is giving me major chest pain.

Kara: You're very stressed out. She's only doing it for very low-risk birth.

Linda: You're only low risk retrospectively. So that's fun. So to kind of piggyback off of that, if she's the dream doula in the water tub, I'm cutting your baby out.

So I work with female physicians who are negotiating their salary packages because as in many fields, medicine is not exempt to the gender gap and it's actually gone so far as to careers and different specialties that are more female predominant tend to start making less money as more women get into the field. And so it's a huge passion project of mine, so I help women negotiate better contracts. And so obviously the career balance thing comes up from time to time.

Kara: I love that. Such a beautifully perfect, specific niche. No one is confused about whether they should hire you or not. Are they an OB? And do they need to negotiate a pay package? Yes, no. Just a binary choice. There's nothing else to think about. Alright, Emily.

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Emily: I'm Emily Leathers and I help software engineers thrive in every aspect of their lives. I find that there are, as we'll talk about today, so many open paths to us as leaders and as software managers that we can get really lost in the options. And we can get really lost in believing, as you said earlier Kara, that there's one right way to do things.

And helping folks find the definition of success that works for them at work, the definition of success that works for them in the broader version of their life and learning how to stick with their definition and not constantly get pulled off course by all the other things that they're good at, but that aren't their very favorite thing.

Kara: Nice. And you work with people of all genders?

Emily: I do, yeah.

Kara: Any software engineer, okay.

Emily: If you are in software leadership, you are a great fit.

Kara: And presumably if you know what software leadership means, that's a sign that you're a great fit. I do not know what that means because I am not a software engineer.

Emily: Fair. It's mostly managers and project leads. Those sometimes folks who are looking to move into those roles are also reaching out.

Kara: This is just further proving my point. I don't know what that means either, which is fine, I don't need to, I'm not your target market, I'm not a software engineer. Julie, tell us what's up.

Julie: I feel like this is a variety pack. We're such a variety pack, which is so cool.

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Kara: This is like the Vaudeville show on this podcast, just like a little bit of all the different talents.

Julie: Yeah. So I'm going to round out to say that I work with veterinarians, primarily women because believe it or not, most veterinarians actually are women. And I support them in something that relates to helping professions, which is something called compassion fatigue.

And it's similar to burnout but a little bit different, and I help them love their work again because their work is something that if you ask any veterinarian, they will tell you that they wanted to be a veterinarian since they were probably five years old. And had such an idealistic idea about what it was going to be like, and then finally achieve that and are often not so happy in that field. So that's who I work with.

Kara: Love it. Alright, so I guess let's just start off with I'd like to hear maybe from each of you, we're not going to every question as a round robin but I'd love to hear what does balance even mean for the people in your niche or in your coaching, why was this a topic - so that you guys know when people are in the advanced certification, I invite them to get together and coordinate with each other to pitch me to be on the podcast in different groupings, to sort of encourage collaboration and creative thinking across different niches and disciplines about the coaching tools.

And so the four of you found your way together and pitched me on this, so I'd just love to hear from each of you kind of why this was a compelling topic for you, why it's a compelling topic for your niche, and why you brought it to me. Let's just do the same order we did introductions just for this one so that everybody knows when to go. You want to start us off, Amanda?

Amanda: Yeah. So I basically am my clients. So six years ago I was trying to find work-life balance. So I had a little kid, I had a leadership position,

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and basically I just felt like crap all the time because I felt like when I was at work, I wasn't doing a good job and I should be home with my kid, and when I was with my kid, I should be working.

And so basically being told that there's such a thing as work-life balance was almost an insult. Like I don't think I can balance these things. These are both big, huge buckets in my life, let alone actually having a personal life and trying to do other things outside of work and life.

And so that's where most of my clients are when they come to me is they have big jobs and some have kids, some don't, some have elderly parents that they're taking care of, and basically just doubt themselves all the time no matter what they're doing. So then we have a culture that tells us that if we just can figure out how to balance it, then everything will be fine and we think, oh, skipping through the daisies.

And we know that's not true, so then it almost becomes a way for women to fault themselves more. So that was actually when I found your work Kara, and that changed everything for me. So just learning how to manage my thinking and my anxiety and my expectations for myself, and so I think balance really is something that's individual for different people, so it looks different depending on what your values are.

Kara: So do you think now that balance is a thing that exists and can be achieved? First you were like, they're these two big buckets, they can't be balanced, do you think you've changed your idea of what balance is or are you now because of mind management able to balance in a different way?

Amanda: That's a great question, and I think it's kind of like a chicken and egg thing because thought management for me personally has changed my life. Let me answer it this way. I think a big part of what's so hard to manage are those feelings of insecurity and self-doubt and looking to everybody else for our value. And really, once I personally was able to

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navigate that and spend less energy on self-doubt, then that was when things became easier to manage, to balance.

Kara: Interesting. Alright Linda, what about you?

Linda: Yeah. So I think my people really think of balance as something to achieve. It's a check box. You're going to get a diploma in balance, congratulations. And a lot of it is really well intertwined with the rival fallacy, which is this is going to be better as soon as I'm blank.

Because medical training is so long, so we always joke that we're a little bit stunted because you don't actually have a “real life” until you're in your 30s. And so you go through medical school and you're like, okay, residency is going to be better because I'm actually touching patients instead of reading about all these basic science things.

And then you get to training and you're like, my attending life is going to be better because I'm actually going to get paid real money, and I'm actually going to get to sleep sometimes, and people are going to stop yelling at me and throwing instruments in the OR.

And then you get to your attending job and all of a sudden, the same problems that you had as a human, magic, come up again. So you have a bigger salary, and you have different responsibilities, and you may have a better work schedule, you may not, but there's still this I'm not there, things aren't balanced, I'm still struggling to “balance” my life and my job and a family and whatever.

And I think it's exacerbated because a lot of the medical jobs haven't really caught up with the times and the more diverse workforce. And so a lot of physician positions really look the same way they did in 1950. And the people filling those positions in 1950 were these older white guys who had a stay-at-home wife who did everything else.

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And so there was no need for balance. There was I show up to work, I can stay at work for 16 hours and it's no problem because somebody else is taking care of everything else, versus now you have a more culturally diverse and a more gender diverse workforce and people are like, I don't want to work 16 hours, I would maybe like to see my kids, I would maybe like to see my husband

God forbid I have a day to myself. Novel concept. And so I think there's this kind of discordance between what we want and what we feel like we should be able to do, and it really leads to a lot of dissonance and a lot of drama.

Kara: So do you think that learning mindset tools has made it easier to balance or are you on the side of balance is the wrong way of looking at this?

Linda: I'm more on that side. So I think really, I always look at it as I'm like, I'm never going to achieve balance and that's okay. It's just a matter of making sure I'm not dropping the same ball every single day. Like today I'm going to drop the family ball, I'm going to ignore them for a little while and get some work done. Tomorrow I can drop the work ball and maybe not get some things done.

So I think it's just more of deciding that at some point, things may be kind of out of balance and that's okay, and being a little more comfortable with that. And then I think also, giving up on being a physician has to look a certain way is really helpful. So kind of going to that challenging the status quo and rocking the boat a little bit to not accept that this is the only way to do this job.

And then you can kind of choose your own adventure, build your own contract or you job, to really fit who you are and what your priorities are. Because what yours may be may be completely different than mine. So really choosing a work environment that fits you instead of trying to squish

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yourself into one that doesn't I think is also really helpful there. But really just giving up on the idea of balance I think has been earth-shattering for me.

Kara: It's almost like the way you're describing it. It's more like it's going to balance out over the course of a year, five years, 10 years. It's like the way people talk about healthy eating, which is like, you don't have to get every micronutrient and antioxidant at every single meal, or you don't have to be balanced within a certain meal. You're trying to balance within a day, within a week, or even within a month or a year. Over time.

Linda: Right. So you can have everything. You just may not be able to have everything today, at this one moment at the same time.

Kara: Yeah. Alright, Emily, what about you and the software henges or whatever you just called them. Sounds like a hedge witch from a TV show I was watching.

Emily: I love it. So the belief system in my head, the goal of life is to have fun. And one of the big things for me in our certification was really figuring out how to put that in words and own it and not be afraid to say that all over my marketing materials, all over everybody I talk to and everyone I coach.

I started down my path as a manager, loving it. I'm very much a people manager, I think writing level expectations and giving performance reviews is one of the coolest things I can do. And I know even other managers think that's a little off the deep end.

But along that path, I totally lost sight of all of the fun for myself and I was in these roles that I loved and working with people I adored, and totally miserable. Because as I think other folks have mentioned, self-doubt, anxiety, over-scheduling myself, and for me, really digging into thought work and my own self-coaching through your program, through master

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coach training last year, through a number of other aspects, I've gotten myself back to that place where I'm loving my work and I'm thriving in it.

And one of the things I really had to think about was my success criteria. And for me, that meant creating a totally different notion of what the word balance meant. So I love the question you've been asking folks of do you agree with balance. I think my answer is yes, I think balance is important, I just redefined it.

And for me, I defined it as balance is that I like the balance of my quality of life. And I basically took the idea of balance and I made it - the same way we talk about 50/50 in emotions. It's do I like the ratio of different experiences in my life and how I'm thinking about myself and how I'm thinking about my life.

Do I love the balance I have between fun and challenged? Do I love the balance I have between the different portions of who I am? And I think in that way, balance is a great way to think if it works for you. But I know for so many folks it brings up this very black and white we're supposed to have static ratios of work and non-work, where non-work gets lumped together and work is the standard frame of mind we view everything through. That's its own kind of problem. And where every week is supposed to look the same.

And I think I just kind of took that - there's a 3D grid way to explain this but of course this is a podcast and I can't show you things with my hands. But basically flipped it the other direction and instead of saying how much time am I spending on each of these tasks, I was talking about how much time am I spending on things that bring me joy, how much time am I spending on things that help me grow, and that make me feel challenged, and that's been a really big difference for me.

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And I know one of the things we were talking about coming into this as well and that Linda touched on was really that idea of feeling like there's a set path or a set person you're supposed to be. And that a lot of folks in the medical field are told don't rock the boat, fit into the box that these older white male doctors created before you, do exactly what they do.

I think the folks I work with have really the opposite problem. We talk all the time about how there's so many ways to be a leader within tech, there's so many ways to be a leader as an engineer. We have so many options for how to craft your career, and there are no playbooks.

And so we're generally rewarded for innovation, for rocking the boat, for having big impact, for questioning everyone. And yet, we feel wrong and we feel like we have too much work, and that holds us back from doing all of those things effectively.

And I really just love the contrast because we spend so much time when we're talking about coaching, talking about circumstances versus thoughts, and if the folks you work with can feel like they're constrained and so they can't find the balance they want, and the folks I work with feel like there's too many options and no direction so they can't find the balance they want, big surprise, I don't think it's the work environment that's making folks feel like they don't have balance.

Kara: And balance isn't a circumstance either.

Emily: It's something you define for yourself. It's saying there's not this one end goal that you meet. It's setting your own success criteria.

Kara: I think that's so important because I do think people think that balance is a circumstance. Whether it's a static state I'm in or a thing I'm in sometimes, it's like oh, balance is - it's like having the balance on the plate. These are factual things, I have balance now.

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But of course, one person might think working 80 hours a week is balanced because they're comparing it to 120, and one person might think working 20 hours a week is balanced because they don't want to or can't work more than that. So I think we're having this conversation as though balance even exists, and this happens all the time in thought work.

We have to pretend that something's a circumstance just so we can have a conversation about it, but it's actually just a thought. No matter what your life looks like, you could choose to think that it's balanced if you want. Or you could choose to think - and I want to come back to this after we let Julie in on her initial thing about why balance is supposedly a good thing. But Julie, tell us how balance comes up for you and then I have a question I want to pose to you all about balance overall.

Julie: For me, balance, it's interesting because it's just a word. And to Emily's point, it's like how we define that. And what comes up mostly I think for me is this idea about - because for some people they interpret work-life balance almost like a dirty word. Like we can't even say that, oh my gosh.

But what I teach as it relates to what we're looking for and whether or not I call it balance or not is to the extent of which, again, anyone who's working in a helping profession where you are serving others, animals, humans, whatever, to the extent of which you're giving of yourself, there does need to be some replenishment.

And therein lies and again, is that a 50/50 ratio? I mean, who knows what the ratio is? But the point is is there something coming back in? A refilling the tank? Are we rejuvenating ourselves in some way? Because very similar to medical school, veterinary school is extremely demanding.

And what happens to veterinarians is they get out of vet school and they're completely imbalanced because their whole lives, 24/7, 365 has been about that med. I'm going to guess that's probably the same for physicians.

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And then they get into this field that's extremely demanding that wants every bit of life force that they have and they're told because again, predominantly, this was a male-dominated field, so all the women are told hey, you just have to suck it up, your work ethic is lacking, it's you that's the problem.

Versus, wait a minute, maybe there's some systematic or structural problems here where we're not even allowing for a culture that supports mental health and wellbeing. And so I help my clients give themselves permission to create boundaries, to say no, and manage their mind around all of that.

Because that's the tricky part. The tricky part is to manage our mind around me saying no. Saying no isn't hard, but it's my thoughts about all of that that again are generating all of that guilt. It's my thoughts about the boundary that I created that again is preventing me because of the guilt that I'm feeling and I'm trying to alleviate that. So that's a lot of the focus of the work that I do.

Kara: It's something that's come up with several of you is this sort of idea that things used to be balanced in the sense of the people doing the profession did the work half of life and then they had people at home who did all the other things. And now we're trying to have sort of one person do both of those things and balance it. And that's a whole different type of balancing.

But I think one thing I'm curious to hear you guys talk about, let's say for sure there are people who want more - whether you call it balance or whatever, they want a different distribution of the hours of their life and they're having trouble doing that either because the place they work doesn't allow for it, their mindset isn't in the right place, whatever it is, so there's people who do want “balance.”

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I also just think it's interesting that there's this underlying assumption that balance is good and everybody should want it. I feel like I see this especially with parents and moms where it's like, not okay to be like, well, I kind of actually do want work to be my main - of course there are people who want to spend more time with their kids and aren't able to and that's one thing we need to work on.

But I think it's interesting that I think there are people who think that they're supposed to want balance or that things should be balanced, but they're really fighting against their own actual inclination or desire, which is like, well, I kind of do want my life to be 70/30 or 60/40, which no one has ever complained about men.

Men's lives have professionally historically for the last 100 years been 80% work and 20% their family, and that was never considered a problem or a sign that something had gone wrong, and nobody was talking about how our work structures don't allow men to balance their fatherhood with whatever.

So I'm just curious, do we actually need to back this whole cultural conversation up for a minute and be like, why is balance supposedly a good thing? I mean, okay, if you want it, you want it, but do you find that your clients sometimes don't know why they want balance or just think they're supposed to have balance, or it sort of covers up actual interrogation or exploration that should be going on about what kind of life you do want? Do you think it's okay to actually want to work 80 hours a week or does that make you a bad mother and a bad wife and a bad person so you don't actually think that's okay?

Julie: I will tell you what - the reason that my clients want balance is because they are so exhausted and drained from the work that the pain point is that then they give the “worst” of themselves to the people they love

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the most because they have nothing left. When they get home, they got nothing.

Kara: But are they drained by the work or are they drained by their thoughts about the work?

Julie: Both.

Kara: Because I mean, that is something I find a lot too is that you're like, it's almost like the coaching I do on sleep when people are like, no, just physically if I sleep five hours a night I can't function. I'm like, when you first met your partner and you stayed up having sex all night, were you so exhausted you couldn't function the next day? And they're like, no, it was amazing, I wanted to do it again right away.

And obviously there's your thoughts about your work, your thoughts are what create burnout, and so you can be working long hours on something you're super excited about and feel fine, or you can work three hours on something and your mental drama makes you exhausted.

How do we think that balance plays into this when - it's like people come into it being like, the circumstances of what I spend my time doing are what create burnout or balance for me, when in fact, is balance an emotional state people want?

We could have the hours on the ledger could be whatever, they could be perfectly aligned, and you could still feel miserable, or they could be completely out of whack and you could feel amazing. So it's like, what are we even talking about when we're talking about balance?

Are we talking about a sense of wellbeing? Are we talking about the belief that every area of your life is getting the attention it needs? Are we talking

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about an actual hourly accounting? Where do you think balance goes in the model? It's not a C.

Amanda: I think that's such a good question. In fact, that was a lot of questions. But I've been making notes and...

Kara: This is my podcast. I'll ask as many question in a row as I want. This is also because I yelled at them all that I had no questions and that they better come prepared, so here we are.

Amanda: We just got to liberate the llama.

Kara: It's now I role.

Amanda: So yeah, I think balance is a thought, and I'm curious what the other ladies have to say but my clients come to me because they've led very prescriptive lives so they got the degrees, they married, they have the house, they got the promotion, they've done all the things, and now they're looking around and they're like, but wait.

It's like the Talking Heads song, this is not my beautiful house, this is not my beautiful life. And they're like, I'm not happy, so there's the guilt associated with that because on the outside their life looks great. But so then they're looking around like if I'm not happy, why am I not happy?

And work-life balance is kind of part of the ether of our culture of if I'm not happy, it must be because things aren't balanced. I don't have enough time with my kids, or I don't have enough time for myself, although that's a whole other topic. But yeah, I think it's a thought and it's really just when we're grasping for why we're not happy or fulfilled, it must be because we don't have balance.

Kara: I think people think if they had balance, they wouldn't be stressed, right? It's like balance is somehow the absence of stress about work or

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stress about - people are like, if I just get the scale totally balanced, then I won't feel bad about work and I won't feel bad about my family. So I think people almost think it's an emotion. They want it because of whatever emotion they think they're going to have, which is just like the absence of the stress that they feel now.

Emily: I think about that slightly differently. I don't think we inherently think that balance is the absence of stress. I think we think balance will lead to the absence of stress because it's just this big societal concept that's been put out there as the solution to the problem.

Once you've found the way to reach this nebulous balance that no one can define, that will be the point where you feel good. And so in the same way that we go searching for something because we think it will make us feel better, I think folks go searching for that notion of balance because everything in popular culture tells them that once they reach it, they'll stop feeling terrible like they do right now.

Kara: Yeah. I think people think it's a circumstance they'll reach and then they'll feel better, but it's just interesting because it's circular. How you know if you've reached balance? Because I'll feel better. So as opposed to being like, well if I lose 20 pounds, if I make a million dollars, we can be like, okay, there's literally the number on the scale is there, the money is in your bank account.

I think balance is so undefined unless they actually set some kind of target goal, which maybe software engineers would do. Unless they're like, these are the hours, and then they can be like, okay, I've achieved balanced, I think most people are like, I know I'll have balance when I'm not stressed out and feeling insufficient in these areas, which of course never happen.

So even if your hours were like, perfectly balanced, you wouldn't think you had balance. It's like when you try to turn some sort of non-well-defined

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thing into the destination you're going to arrive at, then you're only going to know if you're there by the feeling better, which never happens so you never think you're there.

Emily: And you add it to the pile of things you're feeling like you're failing at.

Kara: Yeah. Then you're like, I can't even get balanced, so now I got to feel shitty about this. Totally. What do the rest of you think?

Linda: Yeah, and that's so fun because it translates nicely. I read this study because I'm a nerd and they were looking at working long hours versus workaholism and kind of separating the two as two very distinct things. And their definition of workaholism was more based on this compulsion to work and thinking about work when you weren't there. Almost like you would think about an addiction.

Kara: The anxiety when you can't work, if you don't work, you're going to feel anxious and bad.

Linda: Right, that restless, that compulsion to work, versus being at work. And they found that working long hours didn't actually have any health consequences. So there's a lot of data saying if you work x amount of hours you have these health consequences.

When they really sifted out workaholism versus working long hours and they did that by just asking about some of the compulsions and restlessness and anxiety, they found that it was the compulsion to work that was correlated with a lot of the health markers instead of the actual hours. So you could actually work less hours but feel compelled to work when you're not working and you were going to have those poor health outcomes.

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Kara: And that totally makes sense. If you've ever met someone - I used to be in academia. There are academic who are just like, I want to nerd out on this 20 hours a day, this is my favorite thing in the world, and they don't seem stressed at all. They're just like, I can't wait to get back to my whatever, dinosaur bones or 17th century literature, whatever it is I'm doing.

I feel like when I was in academia, I was looking around being like, this isn't the right place for me because I don't feel this way about my academic work. These people are so excited. I think that totally makes sense. It's like what's the T and F line? Not what's the A line. The A line can look the same, like I'm at the office 12 hours, but that emotional experience can be so different.

That's so interesting. I love that. That's like the whole stress is only bad for you if you think it is phenomenon. So good. I love that, I'm totally going to steal that and use it.

Emily: One of the words that really came - I remember the sentences that really I noticed in my head constantly over the last few years was there's something I'm supposed to be doing right now, or there's something else I should be doing right now. And how much that would eat into my time enjoying reading a book.

Even things that felt like they were productive, there was something else I should be doing instead. And I think when we bring that into this idea of balance, I think that's kind of one of those other things we hope will go away. Balance is when there's nothing else we should be doing right now because everything has its place and we never have to worry that we're failing, we never have to worry we're ignoring something.

Kara: Yeah. I think people think when I have balance, I'll be able to be present in my life. But your presence in your life has nothing to do with

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balance or hours. It has to do with your thought process. It's such a good capacious concept. You can shove as many emotional desires in there as you want.

I always think about this woman who when I got my first life coach training at the Holiday Inn in El Dorado Hills where I first got trained. There was this woman in our group who wanted to lose weight and so she kept getting asked why she wanted to lose weight, and she kept saying I'll be happier, I'll be fitter, and I'll be younger.

And she kept saying it. Her brain did not - it was such a brain glitch because that's what we're sold. And in her mind, it's like anything I want to feel or be is on the other side of that weight loss. That's like this too.

Emily: I love the idea that she thinks it would actually turn back the clock on her age.

Kara: That's what's so interesting. It was unconscious. So we kept being like, you know you won't be younger, right? And she was like, yeah, of course. Then why do you want - and she would say it again. And it was like, subconsciously, that programming is so strong that being thin and pretty and what being young means and that's what will make you happy, her brain had just sucked it right in.

The way we're talking about balance right now makes me feel like it's a purse, you can just shove more and more stuff into, it just gets more and more distended, it's going to carry all this weight. It's going to make me not fight with my partner, it's going to make me feel better at my job, it's going to make me sleep better, it's going to make me feel happier, it's going to make me feel present, it's going to make me feel like a good mom. If I just get balanced, then all that stuff is going to happen for me.

Julie: Yeah, it's like a nirvana that we're after. And then...

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Kara: The heavens open and they are like, you have achieved balance. You will now no longer experience the human condition, congratulations.

Julie: All is well with the world.

Kara: Yeah exactly. I think it's like so many things in coaching it sounds like where sort of you got to let go of it before you can redefine it for yourself. I just feel like if everybody who's obsessed with balance, if they understood however balanced your life is, you're still going to wake up in a shitty mood sometimes or just be sad, you're still going to have human emotion, not an exit ramp off the human experience, there would be so much less pressure on it.

Then it just becomes like this is just the math of how I spend my time and I might want to change it and I might not want to and it's just not such a big deal. As opposed to that gripping of like, I just don't have any balance, if I just get the balance then everything will be wonderful.

Amanda: Yeah. I think instead of balance, what we're really looking for is emotional health. So how do we understand that life is 50/50 and how do we have clean pain versus dirty pain and really manage our emotions rather than this set point of balance that doesn't even exist.

Kara: Yeah, and I think as always, we have to clarify, we're not saying that you shouldn't take steps if you want to be working less or get a different job or negotiate a different pay raise or spend more time with your kids. The point is just like, telling yourself that you're failing at figuring out how to get to the circumstance that will make you not have the human experience anymore, that's not actually on offer.

Linda: Yeah. And I think just taking it off one more thing on your to-do list. Like I'm going to achieve balance on Monday. Taking it away as something you have to achieve. It can just be something you may happen to

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experience sometimes, but just taking it off the list of constant things we have to strive for. I think just striving for balance is enough to really help us kind of almost spin out and think about...

Kara: It's so boring too. The more we say the word balance, I'm like, what is this milk toast wellness word? Nothing I'm doing in my life is like, I just want to feel balanced. I want to have an amazing, exciting, inspirational life. Some of it's going to be amazing, some of it's going to feel horrible. And maybe this is just the extremist in me but just the more we talk about it, I'm like, why do we have to be balanced?

Julie: And over the long term, you may be. And so I loved what you said earlier about diet because you can eat pizza all day for a day be totally fine. Most of us survived college on some version of ramen noodles.

Kara: This is making me think about what if you would take this to the extreme and you're like, that baby is not doing any work, it's not having a balanced life. It's like, there's whole years of our lives that we don't do any intellectual labor and then there's whole years of our lives that we're not caretaking.

There's times you don't have kids, there's times you do have kids. There's times you're doing a lot of partying maybe before you have kids, and now these 10 years your social life is - the idea that it's sort of always supposed to be so balanced as opposed to of course your life is going to look very different at very different times and why would we think that it's always supposed to be this sort of same, averaging out in the middle.

Emily: Right, nothing's gone wrong.

Kara: Right. Always. Always the answer.

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Julie: And I was just thinking about partly why it feels as though one is out of this idea of balance is that also we've got technology. We don't have to physically be at work to still be working, and that's new. That wasn't always the case.

So it's like, we can be checking our patient records and bloodwork and be calling back clients and doing all this stuff that normally we were only able to do in the confines of the brick and mortar, which now extends and it bleeds on over into our personal life.

And again, we still come back to well, that is coming back to reining our brain into understanding making a hard stop of I stop working at x time of the day. Because if we don't do that, again, then what we're after again is a feeling, that feeling state that we're after because it feels as though work now has encroached on our entire life.

Kara: Yeah. It's so interesting. I always wonder if that's another kind of truism of these days, I'm sure it is true, but didn't people use to bring home files from the office? I feel like we have this idea that somehow before the cellphone, nobody ever worked past dinnertime and that just doesn't really feel like it's true to me.

I feel like people - certain jobs, yeah, you can't do surgery when you're not in the OR. But you can't do that at home on your cellphone either. I don't doubt that technology has brought more of that in, but I also do think sometimes we're just like, before 1991 nobody ever was a workaholic.

People just stayed at the office late. Plenty of people were just calling home every night being like, I'm not coming home for dinner, I'm stuck at the office. So I totally agree with you about the solution obviously, but I think we tend to blame technology when we're like, nothing I can do about it. It's like, the technology's fault. It's like, no, plenty of people stayed late at the office because of their brains beforehand. Now the office is in your living

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room but it's the same problem. You got to use your thoughts to create those boundaries. Emily, did you want to get in here?

Emily: I was just noticing that that list you mentioned, those were all circumstances. And if we're looking to create the perfect pie of intellectual work and caregiving and running and yoga and reading and knitting, all we're really trying to do is think that there's some orchestrated set of circumstances that will suddenly unlock the feeling that we want. And I know we've now said that in probably 15 different ways during this conversation.

Kara: You can never say it too much. I have 400 podcast episodes that basically just say the same thing. Not 400, 200 maybe.

Emily: So I'm not sure if I've listened to all of them yet. It's my feelings are created by my circumstances, right?

Kara: Exactly. Circumstances create feelings, force your actions, and you have no responsibility for the results in your life. That's how the model works.

Emily: I knew I was doing this right. I was also going to say one of the things that I've noticed from all of the conversation we've had so far is not just that kind of common thread that balance is this thing you're striving for, but also that it's individual. It's just you.

You're solely responsible for it and the only unit it's measured across is yourself. I think we'd all be healthier if we dropped the idea of balance is a goal that we want but if we're going to use it as a useful construct, I don't think it's helpful to do it in that isolationist, individualist sort of way.

Kara: I think it's such a good point that what if spent eight hours at work and the whole time you're berating yourself and thinking you should be

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doing more, and then you spend eight hours with your children, the whole time you're berating yourself and thinking you should be - you are not balanced. You are not experiencing what you wanted to experience with balance. It is literally all what you're going to be thinking about yourself.

So just like any other goal, you have to change your thoughts to experience it and if you manage to white-knuckle it without changing your thoughts, it's not going to solve your problem. So I would love to hear from each of you as a wrap up, if there's one takeaway that you want to share about balance or anything that we haven't talked about that you want to get to, what is your closing thought about balance apart from as we all know, it's not a circumstance? It's a feeling or a thought but it's definitely not a circumstance. That much we agree on. Feel free to jump in, whoever's got something.

Linda: Yeah. I think just allowing yourself to know, A, it's a moving target, it's not this one attainable goal that's going to look a certain way all the time. And just letting it not be - you don't have to strive for that. You don't have to have achieve balance on your calendar for Tuesday.

And so just allowing it to be something that isn't a priority for you as a kind of task. Just allowing it to happen how it is and sometimes it's going to look different and that's fine.

Kara: This also makes me think like, it's like people want balance to do the work of having those boundaries for them, which it won't do. So you might have a time you're busier at work, and so what you really need to make sure you do is carve out an hour at the end of the day that's just for you.

Whereas maybe on other more “balanced” days, you have four hours. But actually the problem isn't so much that change. It's when you go too far in the other direction. We're sort of like, okay, it's busy at work so that means

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I can't say no to anything and I have to work literally every minute I'm awake.

It's like we want balance to save us from our perfectionism and extremism, which it's not going to do. We have to save ourselves from that with the way that we think. Yeah, so good.

Julie: Yes. For me, it relates so much of what we learned in your amazing course about how women are socialized to essentially get their worth from the external about what they're doing, doing, doing for others, others, others.

And it is about that retraining and coming back to well, hold on a second, I'm worthy, I'm worthy of my own time, and I have to teach people how to give themselves - I start with one minute because I'm working with people who don't know how to give themselves any of their own time and attention so we start with one minute. One minute a day and build from that.

And that really starts this foundation of giving permission and acceptance of the fact that the thing that you're striving for, the thing that you want so bad, again, comes from what you're telling yourself. It comes from the conversation and your relationship with yourself. And once you dial that in, it changes of course everything.

Kara: I love that. One minute to start. Start with the 1%. So good.

Amanda: Yeah. I was having a couple of different thoughts but I'll focus on one. And that is just the concept of work-life balance inherently focuses predominantly on white, economically privileged, cis gendered, heterosexual women. Not everybody wants the same things and not everybody is in the same group.

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Kara: Or is in a position to get those things. I almost brought this up earlier because this is looking at the group of the people on this call, who this problem affects. And you have to be in a certain level of economic privilege to be - you're not working three jobs and sleeping three hours a night. You can be thinking about how to balance your parenting and your leisure time.

Amanda: 100%. And so what exactly are we balancing? Traditionally it's been balancing the high-profile career with having a family. But what if we don't want a family? What if we don't want the career? What is the balance? What does that look like?

Kara: Yeah. And I think that also points to the idea that there's some places where we need structural change and there's some places we need mindset work. But either way, sort of trying to rearrange the circumstances of your calendar is not going to produce the solution to the problem.

Emily: For me it really just always comes down to the ways that we're trying to get someone outside of us to define success because we want to be able to feel these feelings of safe and happy at the same time. And so we want someone else to tell us what right looks like and what good enough looks like so that we can feel happy with where we are and know that we're not doing anything that puts our exceptions from other people at risk.

For me, the only thing that's ever really made a difference in this is stopping and defining what success looks like for me in my life in terms of emotion and the ratios I want to create for myself between those emotions. It's never had to do with time and activity. That didn't work. That was a great intermediate step that helped me set good boundaries.

But it was when I sat down and said this percentage of my time, at least 50% will be emotions that I'd rather not feel, this percentage will be ones that I may be more excited about, how do I want that to break down, where do I want joy, where do I want grief, and really just coming to terms with - I

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guess it's really defining what the human experience I think should look like. And then I can get a lot more comfortable with the fact that I was living that human experience.

Kara: I'm like, can we pick how much, what percentage of time we want to feel negative emotion? Is that a functionality we have that I just didn't know about? This is maybe only if you're a software engineer.

Emily: I mean, yes and no. I don't think we get to define it and keep it like firmly boxed. But there actually - it does come back to a lot of ways that I think about software and there's an analogy around tech that I really want to use that will make no sense to anyone so I'm not going to.

Kara: This is just an ad for software engineers that none of the rest of us understand. I personally don't find that I can hack my brain to have only negative emotion when and where I want it, but if I ever figure it out, I will share it with the rest of you.

Emily: It's not the only when and where you want it, it's that you look back at the end of the month, the end of the year and say did I like the ratios I ended up with and the way I think we like the ratios is by setting a reasonable expectation for what they're going to be.

So we have to start by being reasonable with ourselves about what our life is going to be like. And then we can kind of decide what we want to tweak. But if we're trying to set this unrealistic I never feel stress and I always feel happy and I never feel worried, we're never going to...

Kara: As long as the ratio is 50/50 basically. As long as you pick the ratio of 50/50, then you can look back and be satisfied.

Emily: Exactly.

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Emily: And I think sometimes we have to get more detailed about what 50/50 really means before we can accept that we're okay with it.

Kara: I think the idea that's sort of another way of thinking about “balance” is okay, I want to experience joy, I want to experience passion, I want to experience motivation, I want to experience this. These don't all have to be happening in every area of my life. Maybe I want to experience contentment at work but excitement in my personal life, or vice versa.

Rather than thinking that every area of your life should have this micro balance even within it where you feel all the things. People will sort of be like, I have to feel all the same emotions about my job and my romantic relationship and my whatever. Well no, maybe different feelings based on different thoughts and different contexts.

Alright, so I think our takeaway is balance is whatever you make it and also doesn't exist, which is really kind of the takeaway of all thought work podcasts really. But when you have been creating a lot of drama and stress for yourself by believing that a concept is a real thing that does exist that you should achieve, it's very freeing to realize that it's not.

So thank you all for coming on. This was so great and such a pleasure to have you all in ACFC too, but I'm so glad we had this conversation for all those chickens running around like chickens with their heads cut off trying to balance everything. Thank you guys.

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