

UFYB 203: Goal Sobriety & Habit Formation



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB 203: Goal Sobriety & Habit Formation

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 have been thinking about all of you. I am really loving doing these interviews I've been doing lately where you get to hear kind of all different perspectives on thought work and all the amazing specialties that some of my friends and colleagues and students have, but I also love just hanging out with you just the two of us.

So I have been working really hard on the curriculum for our upcoming Clutch College, which is all about setting goals. And so I know some of you listening are coming, I'm so excited to teach you this material and teach you how to set and achieve any goal.

And for those of you who are like, what the fuck is Clutch College? The Clutch is my feminist coaching membership program and Clutch College is a small group live event that we do a couple of times a year that you have to be in The Clutch to attend.

And we are working this time all about how to set and achieve big goals, where people go wrong when they're trying to set and achieve big goals at each step of the process, when and why people set the wrong goal or the wrong scope of the goal, what goes wrong in the planning process, what goes wrong in the execution process.

And so I've been thinking a lot about goals, habit formation as I'm putting together this really in depth curriculum on it. And so today I just want to teach all of you a little piece of that, which is something that I think is really misunderstood about goals.

UFYB 203: Goal Sobriety & Habit Formation

And this specifically relates to goals that have to do with habit formation. So I think all goals really do involve showing up to do some hard, boring, unglamorous work. And sometimes it is a sort of limited time goal where you need to develop the ability to take consistent action for a limited period of time. So that's like a short-term habit sort of.

And sometimes actually the habit is the goal. You want to become someone who drinks a certain amount of water every day, or remembers to take a vitamin every day, goes for a walk every day, goes to the gym three times a week, gets to bed at a certain time, reads a novel, whatever it is.

So if you want to drink less, you want to eat more vegetables, whatever it is, the habit itself is actually the goal. As opposed to sometimes goals are more of a I want to run a 5K in three months, you're going to have to develop a sort of short-term habit to get there in some sense, but it's a more time limited goal.

But either way, I think that there is overlap and that there's one central misunderstanding that leads to the most burnout and the most abandonment of the goal or the habit. And not surprisingly, this thought pattern is totally in line with perfectionistic, black and white, all or nothing thinking.

And the mistake is fixating on the actual goal itself. And that's why I call the first part of this teaching goal sobriety. So you've heard me teach often that the destination will always feel like the journey. So you can't hate the process and expect to love the outcome. You can't tell yourself dating is terrible and expect to end up in an amazing relationship. You can't tell yourself it's so hard and miserable to make money and expect to make a bunch of money and feel great at the end.

The destination, wherever you end up is always going to feel exactly like you felt on the way there because that's how you've taught your brain to

UFYB 203: Goal Sobriety & Habit Formation

feel because our thoughts create our feelings. The external circumstance of having arrived at the goal, if you ever get there, is not what creates your feelings.

So this is kind of related but it is a different angle on it. And so there are kind of two parts to this mistake or misfocus in the process and that is goal sobriety and habit formation. So what the fuck is goal sobriety?

You know how when you set a new goal, you get all excited. It's like a new love affair. You imagine how amazing it's going to feel to have the goal accomplished, to have made all that money, to have run that marathon, to become the perfect mom who bakes the most amazing birthday cupcakes and never yells at her kids, to have written the novel, whatever it is.

Whether the goal is specific or vague, you fantasize about how amazing it's going to feel. This is what I call goal intoxication. When you are in that headspace, you want the goal to deliver feelings to you. You think the goal will make you feel good.

And so you're high on the potential of the end point, of the goal, of the having it or having done it. You're focused on the outcome. And as you know, if you've listened to perfectionist fantasies, this kind of goal intoxication can be like your entire life MO.

You may spend decades setting goals and then failing to achieve them, making fancy plans and calendars and schedules, and then falling off the wagon the second week you try because you couldn't do it perfectly and then never picking it back up again until the next perfectionist planning cycle starts. It's like a chronic illness of chronic perfectionist planning.

So what I want you to think about is when you approach your goals in this way, when you are in this state of goal intoxication, it's like being someone who likes the initial thrill of the first and second and third date, like you like

UFYB 203: Goal Sobriety & Habit Formation

meeting someone new, you like making out with someone new, you like the butterflies, the excitement, but who freaks out and runs away at the first sign of conflict or difficulty or complicated emotions.

That's goal intoxication, where you're drunk on your future potential. And since this is a thought work podcast, let's be clear. Sort of a side bar but it's important that what we're drunk on is what we imagine we'll get to think and feel about ourselves in the future state. That's all we want.

We don't want the actual outcome in and of itself. It's not valuable to us. What's valuable to us is how we imagine we will feel if we have the thing because we think that circumstances cause our feelings. So we imagine how we would feel if we rode the Peloton five times a week or lost 10 pounds or worked on our paintings every day or had a perfectly manicured lawn that all the neighbors admired, whatever it is.

And we feel that pride and excitement ahead of time, but it's because we are imagining what we would be thinking and feeling about ourselves if we had done the thing. And the head fuck of it is if you can feel that feeling now, you actually are already able to believe your thought now.

If you can feel imagine pride, because in the future you imagine you'd be thinking I'm a disciplined person, and you feel good now, you actually already believe that thought and could be practicing it now. So that is not sort of my main point here but I just think it's important to remember that when we are drunk on goal potential, the goal itself is not what would be causing those good feelings we want. It would just be our thoughts and feelings.

But when we don't understand that, we want the goal to deliver something to us. We are in love with the goal, not the process. And that is the problem and that is what brings me to the second part of this. That's where we

UFYB 203: Goal Sobriety & Habit Formation

completely miss that the true magic lies in habit formation. Not in reaching any particular goal.

So let's say for example if we have a goal that we want to exercise consistently, and so we set this goal by saying we want to go to the gym for 45 minutes three times a week, whatever your goal is. I want to ride the Peloton this many times, I want to go for a walk this many times, I want to go to yoga this many times, whatever.

So you set a specific goal like I've taught you, and then we think that the point of the goal is the yoga or is the running or is the walk or is the Peloton biking. We think that it's going to the gym or doing the thing for that amount of time that often that is the point, that that is the whole valuable thing here.

And so when we miss a workout, or we just don't have it in us to do the whole 45 minutes, or whatever, we revert to this all or nothing thinking and we start thinking it's not worth it, we've already fucked it up, we'll just start it over and do it perfectly tomorrow.

And when we do that, it's because we think it is the doing of the actual thing in question that matters. We think it is the actual 45 minutes of yoga that is what matters, or that it's the writing of the literal pages of the actual novel that matters, that what matters is having produced the five pages every day.

We think the content of the action is what matters, the content of that specific action on that day, that's what matters. And then if we aren't going to do it at all, we're not going to do it all or we're not going to do it perfectly or we're not going to do it well that day, we think there's no point because we've decided that the action itself, the writing, the yoga, the whatever is what matters.

UFYB 203: Goal Sobriety & Habit Formation

And so if you're going to do it badly, you might as well just not do it at all, or if you're going to do it halfway, just don't do it. Because we are sort of fetishizing doing the exact content of the habit that we're trying to create or the goal we're trying to achieve.

So when we're in that mindset, we want the goal and the action to provide us with a positive feeling. And again, that's the goal intoxication. We want to feel excited and motivated and good about ourselves for having done the thing or achieved the goal. And so if we aren't going to feel like we're awesome and perfect because we did the three times a week for the 45 minutes, if we are just going to do twice a week or three times a week for 20 minutes or whatever, we think there's no point because we're in goal intoxication. We have told ourselves I only get to feel amazing if I do this exactly right.

But that is completely the wrong way of thinking about it because the point of a goal is who you have to become to achieve it. It's not the actual content of the goal or the habit or the thing you are doing. That's actually not what matters as much. The point of the goal is who you have to become to create that result for yourself.

Now, there might be a whole cluster of characteristics or identity shifts that come with that, some of which have nothing to do with habits or goals. So if you've set a goal to let's say stop eating meat, you have to shift a bunch of identity stuff, a bunch of thoughts around your palate, what you like to eat, what you like to cook, what kind of cuisines you like, what a family meal looks like.

Those are all belief systems you'll have to change that don't have anything to do with habit and action. Those are sort of the supporting beliefs. But what I want to focus on here is what is common to every goal or habit change, which is that you actually have to create the identity of someone who consistently takes the action required to reach a goal.

UFYB 203: Goal Sobriety & Habit Formation

And that is the point of any goal or any habit. It's not actually the content of the action, especially in a short period of time. It's how you become someone who consistently takes imperfect action to reach a goal.

It's creating the habits and consistent action. And the problem is that when you hear me say consistent action, you hear that as perfect action. That means perfectly consistent, that means doing exactly what I said every time. But that's not what consistent action is over time.

Consistent action over time is imperfect action over time. So in order to see this clearly, it's useful to zoom out. Stop thinking about your life or the habit or the goal in the next three months, in the next six months, or the next two weeks, and think about it in five years or 10 years.

Let's take the same exercise goal. When you look at it as a three-month goal to do a 5K training plan, and you are a week or two behind, you miss a workout or two, now you're already thinking I'm behind, I have to catch up, now I have to try to squeeze in those extra workouts because I didn't do it perfectly, and then eventually you just give up.

But over five years, what really matters? In a five-year span, is what matters three months where you do it perfectly or is what matters that you created the habit of moving your body a couple of times a week when you said you would, even if you only do five minutes some days or 10 minutes some days?

Because some days you are going to do the 45 and some days you might do 15. Or is it that you created the habit of mostly going to the gym when you said you would? Even if you tell yourself you're going three times a week and you only ever go two times a week and you never go the third time of the week, rather than feel like that means you are failing because you're not doing it exactly, can you see how what that means is actually, you have set a consistent habit and become a person over the next five

UFYB 203: Goal Sobriety & Habit Formation

years who goes to the gym twice a week, which is two more times than you're going now when you start to set the goal from zero?

When you are fixated on perfect performance, or on achieving this specific goal in question as the thing that matters, getting to that exact goal, you will give up as soon as it gets hard or as soon as you miss some or as soon as you "fall behind" or whatever. As soon as there is a bump in the road, which is what we talk about in the perfectionist fantasy episode in detail.

But when you understand that the point of the goal is actually the relationship you're building with yourself, it's the relationship you're building with commitment and consistent, imperfect action, that's what matters. Then you won't give up and fall off the wagon.

So a three-month goal fixation looks like I'm trying to run that 5K, I missed a run last week, I missed a run this week, so now I'm behind on my training plan, I'll never catch up. So now what I'm going to do is even though I have yet to successfully do three a week, I'm going to pretend that the next two weeks I'll be able to do four a week to make up and catch up.

Now of course, since I haven't yet done three a week, I'm definitely not actually going to do four a week, then I'm going to fall behind and then I'm just going to give up. But a five-year goal perspective looks like in five years, I am not even going to remember whether I ran this particular 5K on schedule, I am not going to remember that I ran two times those two weeks.

But my life will be very different if I become someone in five years who keeps on showing up for runs even when some of them are a little too short and some of them she misses because over time, the cumulative effect of all the times that I do go for the 45 minutes and the times I go for the 15 minutes is going to add up.

UFYB 203: Goal Sobriety & Habit Formation

The cumulative impact is what matters. Even if half of your workouts are missed or short. Over five years, how many workouts have you done that you wouldn't have done if you were fixated on a short-term goal, did a short burst, gave up, and then repeated that process every six months?

So in the perfectionist fantasy episode, I talk about minimum baseline as the antidote to a perfectionist fantasy or to goal intoxication as I'm calling it here. And the minimum baseline is the idea that you make it the minimum amount you can do consistently. Much, much lower than your brain thinks is possible.

And that is an awesome strategy. I totally recommend it. For some people, even the minimum baseline, they will sometimes miss or not be able to do. Now, theoretically yes, a minimum baseline should be the base minimum you can do, but a lot of us have trouble, especially if we don't get direct coaching on it, setting an actual minimum baseline.

So we still set something that's a little too high and then we don't always do it. But when you think about it with this perspective and habit formation, that's okay. Even though you miss a workout, even though you don't always do the minimum baseline correctly, it doesn't matter.

Because the point isn't the 10 minutes of walking that day. The point is being someone who goes on their walk two or three times a week over five years. And how much accumulated benefit there is to showing up imperfectly, even inconsistently but continuing to show up, rather than trying to do it perfectly and then doing nothing.

So one of my Clutch members did a great post in our Facebook group on habit formation recently and I'm actually going to do an interview with hopefully her and some of the other Clutch members in the next couple of months that I will share with you all after we do the Clutch College on goal setting.

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 203: Goal Sobriety & Habit Formation

But one of the things she said that was so right on that I want to share with all of you was that she said what she discovered was that the process of actually achieving goals you care about is mostly boring and repetitive and hard. It's actually not really fun and exciting.

Because that's not what real commitment is about. And that's so true. Goal intoxication is this should be fun and exciting and feel amazing, and the truth is that accomplishing a big goal or creating a new habit is mostly not fun and exciting, and it's very rarely perfect.

It is actually made up of consistent - when I say consistent, I really mean even consistently inconsistent. Just not giving up. Imperfect action, consistent imperfect action, inconsistent imperfect action, just not letting yourself go back to zero because you're not doing it perfectly, and zooming out to think about the idea of in five years, will it matter? Will I remember that I split halfway through this Peloton ride or that I said that I was going to make the kids' lunches at night and twice this week I made them in the morning?

If I keep doing this, what are the cumulative effects? How do I create a new habit and a new relationship with habit and a new relationship with myself? Who do I become when I just keep showing up to keep doing it inconsistently and imperfectly and I don't ever let that be an excuse to stop doing it altogether?

So if you have trouble keeping new habits or achieving certain kinds of goals that require a lot of consistent, repetitive, boring action, I guarantee this perspective shift will help. Zoom out, think about what the actual point is of developing the habit or achieving the goal.

And this is why goal sobriety completely ties into habit formation because when you're depending on the goal or habit for emotional intoxication, that's when you're attached to doing it perfectly. But when you have sort of

UFYB 203: Goal Sobriety & Habit Formation

sobered up, when you are in goal sobriety and you understand that the goal is not going to make you feel any kind of way, and the habit's not going to make you feel any kind of way because your feelings are created by your thoughts, that's when you can see the value of doing the habit imperfectly over not doing it at all.

Because when the reason you want to go for a walk three times a week is that you'll allow yourself to think that you're a good person who takes care of your body and that's the feeling you're chasing, then of course you're going to give up if you don't do it perfectly.

But when you believe the value of trying to go for a walk three times a week is that over a year or two years or five years or 10 years, your body will benefit from many more walks than it would have had otherwise, even if some weeks it's zero and some weeks it's three and some weeks it's one and some weeks it's two and some weeks they're short and some weeks they're long, when you can allow for all of that variety because you have your eye on the overall prize, which is how do I become someone who walks on a regular basis, even though it's inconsistent and imperfect, that's when you will see the value of showing up even just a little bit.

Showing up even after you missed one, showing up even when you are only going to do half of it, showing up when you are not going to do it so well, but you're still going to show up and do it. The point of the habit isn't the content of the habit over time. It's the building of the habit itself.

And that is the skill that is transferrable to any other habit you want to build, and that's the relationship with yourself that will keep the habit going over the long term. So if you have a habit you're struggling with, zoom out. Ask yourself, how can you do it half-assed this week? How can you keep building the ability to show up imperfectly and inconsistently and keep showing up anyway?

UFYB 203: Goal Sobriety & Habit Formation

That is what will change your life. Because a half-managed mind is a million times better than an unmanaged mind, and half-assing it is better than no-assing it always. Alright my chickens, go half-ass some stuff that you've been not assing at all. I'll see you next week.

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