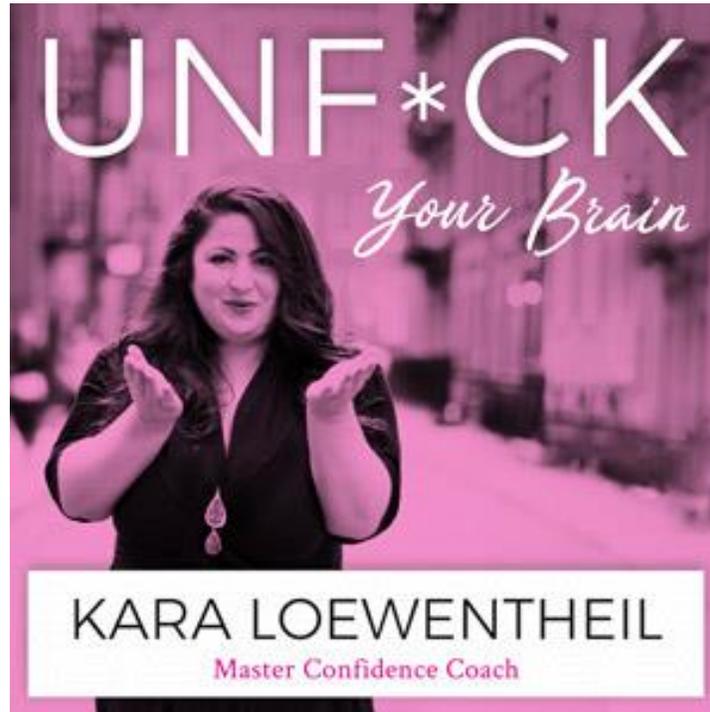


UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

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. I'm sure some of you have seen this, but one of my favorite - I don't even know if it's a meme, but Instagram images that goes around often is this sort of text drawing from I think Emily McDowell is her name, but it basically says we call it self-development because if we called it you're going to feel like you're dying all the time, nobody would do it.

And that is how it feels sometimes. Sometimes it just really feels like you are the sort of experience of confronting your own hurt parts and wounds and traumas, and also your ego and your more primitive instincts and your dysfunction.

All of those things, while also learning to love yourself as perfectly imperfect and still deserving of compassion and care and support no matter what is going on in your brain. It's a lot. It's not a joke and it often feels like dying.

But I've just been thinking about how honestly the main thing that is important is just continuing to be committed to that process. I was having a conversation with somebody and they were like, it's very admirable but kind of overwhelming how self-aware you are.

Please, I have my own blind spots, but what they really meant was not necessarily how accurately self-aware I am because we all have blind spots, but just how much time I spend thinking about my own process and experience and trying to change things.

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

And I was like, yeah, well, it's not really like there's another option. What else would I do? Just sort of rampage around the world with an unexamined mind, just playing out my patterns on everyone around me?

And they were like, "What do you think the rest of us do? Yeah, that's what most people do." So if you're listening to this podcast, I just want you to give yourself a high five because when we start to look inward and we start to have some kind of awakening, it can be really overwhelming because we're really coming up against the coping strategies we've developed that may or may not actually be helping us but that our brains think we need for safety.

We may be coming up against traumas, we may be coming up against just irrational thought patterns, we may be coming up against more primitive parts of our brain that don't really help today, our own ego, our own insecurities, the times that we don't act in alignment with the person we want to be.

And we're trying to learn to love all of that while it's happening. It's a fucking lot. It's a lot. And most people don't even ever try. And that doesn't mean that they're bad people, but it just means I think we have to pause and give ourselves a high five.

Give ourselves some positive reinforcement for being even willing to look within when you could just go through your whole life not even ever doing that. So that's your pep talk for today.

And today, I'm also sharing an interview all about what my guest Dr. Shefali, who is a doctor in clinical psychology and the author of best-selling book, which I talk about in a minute when I introduce her, but what she calls a radical awakening.

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

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

And I think sort of she and I come at things in some ways very similarly, there are places that we maybe disagree or that we aren't teaching exactly the same thing. But it is a really valuable conversation and I think it gets at that experience of what happens when we become radically truthful with ourselves.

But because I know all of y'all are self-critical perfectionists, I just want to remind you that radical self-awareness without compassion is not actually self-awareness. Self-awareness has to include the awareness that you are worthy of love and compassion and self-acceptance.

If you don't have it, then you're not really truly fully aware. So put that in your pipe and smoke it. I'm feisty today. I'm getting ready to pack to go to Clutch College tomorrow, I'm going to be teaching live for the next three days. I'm so excited. It's been so long.

I did a small live retreat in June but I have not taught a bigger live event for two years. Is that right? I think it's the two-year anniversary almost exactly of the first one of these we ever did, which was in Denver in 2019, I guess. What a wild ride.

Alright, I cannot wait, I'm going to hug some of you in person in a few days. And for the rest of you, you'll be listening to this when that's over anyway, so enjoy this interview with Dr. Shefali.

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Kara: Alright my chickens, I am so excited for you today. We are going to be talking to the amazing Dr. Shefali. I know that some of you already are familiar with her and know her work.

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

When I was on her Instagram Live, I know some of you saw that and listened. So we have some crossover, but I think all of you should know about her and her book. So I am going to do just a brief introduction and then I will let her get to the good stuff.

So Dr. Shefali received her doctorate in clinical psychology from Columbia University, three blocks away from me, where I live. Specializing in the integration of Western psychology and Eastern philosophy, which as you all know is something that I also believe in.

She brings together the best of both worlds for her clients. She's an expert in family dynamics and personal development, and she teaches courses around the globe. And she's written four books, including the award-winning New York Times best sellers, *The Conscious Parent* and *The Awakened Family*.

She's been on Oprah's platform, she's been on Good Morning America, the Today Show, all the places you would look. And she lives in New York City, and today she's going to talk about her newest book, which is called *A Radical Awakening*, so welcome.

Dr. Shefali: Thank you for having me. Excited to be here.

Kara: Is there anything I left out of the introduction that you think people should know about you?

Dr. Shefali: Well, I also have a coaching institute and I train people to become coaches in my method. And a lot of courses, so if people want to take a course on the book that we're talking about, or courses on conscious parenting, which is really what my first three books were about, then they can just go to my website.

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

Kara: Awesome. And we will put that in the show notes and everything so it'll be easy to find you. So, since the book is called Radical Awakening, can you share what you would call your own radical awakening to give us an idea of what that might look like as an experience?

Dr. Shefali: Sure. In my life and in general, a radical awakening really speaks to the process of becoming more and more aware of your childhood legacies and how that has informed your patterns in life and taking real ownership of how we have co-created our misery and our joy, and taking our power back, entering our sovereignty, and really realizing that our patterns kept us tethered to the external validation and approval of others.

And it's really time to untether from those toxicities and own our own authentic self. So in my own life, that's what I did. And I've been doing it more and more. It's never a perfect destination.

Kara: Never-ending process for sure. I love that. I'd love to talk a little bit more about I think one of the balances that's often so interesting to try and navigate is sort of how much time to spend understanding the origin of patterns, sort of going into that family story of where did it come from, and where did I get these ideas, and this is how this dynamic might have affected me, without getting stuck in that, "So this is how it has to be, I'll always be like this, my parents fucked me up and now that's that," or whatever your version of that is. So I'm just wondering if you could speak about how do you try to walk that line with your clients or in your own work?

Dr. Shefali: I often say I don't even care how it all began. It's really lovely to know but it's probably just one of your first five caregivers that passed this on to you. So that's never my focus of how it started. My focus is only what is it, what are the patterns, what are they now, and how do they manifest in your life in the now, and how do we disrupt them in the now.

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

All of us grew up with some degree of dysfunctionality, some of us grew up with more trauma than others, and of course, I have compassion for that. But we don't need to get stuck in the how. We just need to get stuck in the what. What it was, what it is now, how can it be disrupted in the present moment.

Kara: I love that. So you write in the book about what you call an epidemic of disconnection and unhappiness, which I think a lot of people will resonate with, especially, I mean, we've had quite a year. I don't know when you were actually writing the content of the book but obviously some of those things I think have been - whatever, the pandemic has been complicated.

Some ways of connecting have been disrupted, some have been improved. But I'm curious if you can share with my listeners, what do you think is causing that epidemic, and how that disconnection affects us.

Dr. Shefali: Well, on one very basic level, technology actually creates more disconnection because we stop meeting in person, we stop being social. We've taken the shorthand way to connect. Texting or Zooming. And it's not technology's fault because of Covid right now, but as a global epidemic, technology is really plagued our existence and taking us further and further away from the present moment.

We're distracted all the time, we don't know how to be still without our phones, simply with ourselves. We don't know how to do that. So that's on one level. But as women, we have been trained to be disconnected to ourselves because we've been raised to live according to some utopic, unattainable, unachievable standard.

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

And we've become slaves to that standard. So by becoming enslaved by a standard, we abduct our authentic self and go and bury it somewhere just in order to meet that standard. So we are living according to the standard, which creates this epidemic of disconnection.

Because instead of being told you are enough as you are, whoever it is you are, there is no standard, you are supposed to be exactly who you are because this is your journey, we have been slaves to the standard of beauty, the standard of wealth, the standard of success, standard of happiness. So we're always living in this eternal sense of discontentment.

Kara: And those are so connected because you're disconnected from yourself, and then you don't know how to connect well with others I think. You can't - you're much more likely to swipe online or send a text or whatever. People can use that technology to alienate themselves from each other too.

Dr. Shefali: Yes, exactly. So we don't stay connected to our present moment as it is and we don't stay connected to other people as they are, and so it's complete layers and layers of disconnection and discontentment.

Kara: I'm curious how you tried to work with that in your own life. As you say, none of us are perfect at this. Are there practices that you use in your daily life to try to maintain that non-digital alienation connection with other people?

Dr. Shefali: Well yes, I connect with my girlfriends all the time. I have a community called Luminous, which is a sisterhood community and we have a lot of women there. I have a lot of stuff that I try to connect - right now it's online, but a lot of person to person connection. And I also don't watch TV,

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

I barely watch Netflix, I never watch serials. So I sit quite a lot. I don't even read that much anymore like I used to. So I create content and then I sit with myself. So I really do those two things.

Kara: I was talking with someone yesterday who is a meditation practitioner, a serious meditation practitioner. We were talking about the idea that nobody even gets a chance to zone out anymore. There's obviously the purposeful sitting with yourself of maybe meditation or breathwork.

But there's also just letting your mind wander, looking out the window of a bus and not doing anything for two hours, and then coming to from that dreamy state. I feel like that's something we've lost with being constantly connected. The brain never gets to just wander.

But I think it's not just technology of course, as you know, for everybody listening, it's part of the reason we're so - so many of us, especially women or people socialized into other marginalized identities, our internal talk is so self-critical all the time.

So of course we don't want to just stare out a bus window for an hour because we wouldn't be having an interesting daydream. We'd be just going through the litany of what is wrong with us and what we need to change and what we haven't done.

Dr. Shefali: So the greatest oppression is what occurs in our mental livestock and all the chatter of all the animals within us. And it's because we think we're not good enough as we are. So that's it. That's the first primal disconnect.

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

So we're always thinking we should be somewhere else, we should be something else, we should be with someone else, we should be doing something else. So no wonder it's so blissed out to just scroll, scroll, scroll.

Kara: Right. We're disconnected from ourselves.

Dr. Shefali: Living according to the standard is so daunting and massacring that we just check out.

Kara: I mean, as somebody who goes on dates in New York, it's always wild to me to see people who are on a date with each other and they're both on their phones. They're on the date and they're both just on their phones. It's just a parallel play I guess in public on their phones.

I was going to say not that my partner and I are never on our phones, but actually, we are kind of never on our phones when we're with each other. But I think we make that very conscious effort. So one of the things you talk about as part of how we can start to heal that disconnect, initially with ourselves is befriending our fears.

There's so much advice out there that's just like, fake it til you make it, which is not what I believe. It's not the same as befriending your fears. I don't think that works. We just have a lot of women in high-powered positions with imposter syndrome anyway. So you talk about how you think about what it means to befriend our fears and how to turn those into courage. What does that process look like?

Dr. Shefali: People always say you have to kind of work on your fears and transcend your fears. I say transcend too, but not with that same energy. I talk about really loving your fears and understanding that they come from a very wounded inner place.

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

And until we honor that inner child, we will actually keep being in fear. So instead of running away from fear or smashing the fear through action, what I talk about is turning inward to the fear, speaking to it, what are you trying to tell me? Where did you come from? What do you want me to do? How can I take care of you?

Soothing the fear as you would a good friend, rather than oh, I'm afraid and I'm just going to go conquer my fear. There's nothing to conquer. That's a very Western linear doing mentality.

Kara: And very male. Very patriarchal. Put on my armor and slay the fear, going to kill the fear. But it's just a part of you, your own thoughts.

Dr. Shefali: So to develop compassion, develop a listening ear. Then you'll be more empathic with other people's fears. If you begin conquering your fears and you think you've conquered them, you'll be horrible to other people when their fears...

Kara: You're going to go conquer their fears too. You're like, I'm here to invade your territory, I've already conquered mine.

Dr. Shefali: You hear people all the time saying, "What are you so worried about? Would you stop complaining?" Again, very masculine, toxic energy.

Kara: So much of this seems to come back to just being that original friend to yourself, right? When your friend says she's afraid of something, you're not like, "You're such a fucking crybaby." That's not how you would ever talk to your friend, but that's totally how you talk to yourself. And you get that initial disconnection from yourself.

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

So I'm so interested in you because a lot of my work and the people who listen to the podcast are very converse with the idea of relating to their thoughts as not them. That's part of what we're all trying to do here from different directions and in different ways.

And you talk about - you have six, if I have them all right, roles that women take on as part of ego protection. And so they have such fascinating, amazing names, so I kind of want to go through each one and talk about each one a little bit because I think my listeners will be very into this.

This is a raise your hand if this is you. One is the helicopter, one of the giver, one is the victim, one is the martyr, one is the taker, one is the diva. So martyr, victim, people probably have some idea of what that is. Maybe giver, but the other ones, especially...

Dr. Shefali: Sorry to interrupt. I think we should talk about the three main areas. There's first the givers, the controllers, and the takers. In the givers are the victims, the martyrs, the bleeding empaths, and the saviors. So the givers are really those who need others' validation in order to feel worthy.

Underneath all of these masks is a sense of unworthiness. So the giver can either take on the role of victim, which is the one who feels wronged all the time, poor me, or the martyr. The martyr is the one who always feels like why is it always me who does everything in the world, it's always me. And the savior is the one who's like, I'm superwoman, I'm going to rescue you all. And the bleeding empath is I care so much, I'm just going to feel all your pain.

So all of these try to tolerate their own internal anxiety and unworthiness by leaving their lane and hopping into the other person's lane and interfering with the other person through this giving energy. Through this very I'll take

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

care of you energy. And it's a little bit of a trap because givers get a lot of praise and validation...

Kara: Right. Everybody listening to this is like, I want to be a giver, that sounds like the nice person, that's who I should be.

Dr. Shefali: And givers are lovely people. I mean, everyone's a lovely person really at the end of the day, it's just a mask they wear. But givers need to understand that they are also doing this to take and what they are taking or need to get is that they need to feel in control. The anxiety is driving them crazy.

They feel like they can only be significant if they give. They feel like they are nobody unless they are somebody to somebody. So that is the shadow side of the giver, and they will literally cripple the other person in order to be needed. Like no, I will wipe your ass, no, I will give you water, you need water.

Kara: Let me just break your leg so I can help you a little bit more. That way I can be your crutch.

Dr. Shefali: Oops, did I just bust your toe, and now I'll just be your legs, exactly. So that's the dark side of the giver. And it's very hard to stop being the giver because we also train everyone else to take. So then when we stop giving, everyone else is like, hello, what happened? So they have a lot of protest against the giver.

Kara: And we train women particularly to give, right? That anything a woman has, her time, her energy, her body, whatever is really just for the purpose of other people getting benefit out of it.

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

Dr. Shefali: Correct. I remember when one of my clients told her family that she didn't want to have a child, they all told her she was a selfish bitch.

Kara: I love that one because that's so common. It's so fascinating. You're like, how can it be selfish? It would be not selfish to have a baby to have someone to love or something to love me or whatever, it's somehow selfish to not - it's just a bizarre thought process.

Dr. Shefali: In all my work in conscious parenting, I actually show parents how selfish they really are. The ones who didn't have children are the selfless ones. So parents don't like that.

Kara: No, I wouldn't think so.

Dr. Shefali: Then there are the controllers, and the controllers are the perfectionist, which is almost every woman, the helicopter. No one wants to think they're the helicopter but when they become a parent or a parent of a pet, they become helicopters. At least parents of children. The tyrant, and the shield.

So I go through this in the book and how really while givers like to give to manage their anxiety, controllers like to do to manage their energy. Givers want to show the world how good they are, controllers want to show the world how competent they are.

So if you're good and competent, you're really screwed, which is most high-achieving women. They're like, really screwed. That high-achieving executive who's a female and she's a mother, she is dying. She's on the verge of collapse.

Kara: Yes, burnt out all the time.

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

Dr. Shefali: Then there are the takers, which no one will want to admit that they are. But we are also takers in many ways. So the takers are the diva, I call them the diva. No one wants to be the diva, but we all in our sub, sub, subconscious...

Kara: We all think we're the center of the story, we're the center of the show.

Dr. Shefali: We want to be. And if we're not, we're upset. We're like, why don't I get any attention? So the divas are I'm entitled, I like to be taken care of, and we don't know we're divas really until we are taken care of. Then we get addicted to it.

So the need to be the attention in the room, the need to get only positive validation. That's a sign of a diva. We all only want positive validation. When anyone criticizes us or complains, we're very annoyed. And that's a trait of a diva. And I teach people, you got to be okay with people not liking you. But we don't like that.

Then there's the princess, and the princess has the energy of I'm special and I will be rescued. So many women who are dependent on their fathers or man or high-powered women or whatever, whoever their partners are, they have this underlying sense of I don't really need to work that hard because somebody else will do the hard work for me.

And it's something that they need to snap the hell out of fast and start paying their own bills and cleaning their own toilets. Because this dependency keeps women paralyzed and stagnant for years. I'll just be rescued, we're just waiting for the prince to come on the shiny horse.

Kara: That's when my life will really start.

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

Dr. Shefali: Yes, their life will start. Then there's the child. The child is this eternal optimist and people like her because she's so cheerful and she's so fun and she's so happy all the time. But she could also be somebody who just doesn't like to confront reality. And she just is like, everything will be fine and we'll live happily ever after, and no, things are not fine.

No, your husband actually has not come home for six weeks because he has another woman. It's not because he's working hard. Like hello? Denial, denial, denial. She just cannot make decisions. So these are the face of the ego and you can identify them and begin to disrupt the patterns. That's really the goal.

Kara: So how do you recommend that people - it of course sounds like we may inhabit multiple of these at any given period of our life or in different stages or any given time. So what do you think the first step - of course people should read your book to get the entire outlay. We can't do it all here. But I do like to sort of leave folks a practical step.

So is the first thing to identify those parts of yourself? What is the first thing somebody should do if they're interested in taking some ownership of, oh yeah, some of that resonated with me, I did sound like A, B, and C of those were me, what's the first thing that they can do?

Dr. Shefali: I honestly think the first step is to really declare your commitment to self-growth. Because if the first step is not followed by the next 20 steps, the first step is useless. So you figure out, yeah, I'm a giver, okay, then.

So the first step is really how committed are you? And then I would say read the book back to back and then hire a coach. Take a course. Get the help you need. It cannot be done all just sitting on your own. Commit the

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

next three months to uncovering your patterns in a real consolidated way. Don't go on vacation, don't go out to eat. Save that money. That's a commitment. This is not easy to do.

Kara: I like it. It's interesting, as you were describing those, I was thinking about - this isn't something I ask every guest, but since we're talking about patterns, I think it would be interesting to ask you. This friend of mine is training to be a pilot, and when you train to be a pilot, I'm probably butchering this but this is what I understand from her.

Beginning pilots basically can't fly unless the sky is clear. If you start to enter a cloud, you're going to probably immediately kill yourself. You need to turn around and leave very quickly. And so over the years, flight training systems have developed the four categories of how to spot the problem in your thinking that's going to probably make you kill yourself. So it's like, one of them is the macho, who thinks...

Dr. Shefali: I can do anything.

Kara: I can do this, it'll be fine, I'm a great pilot, I don't need to turn around. That's the macho. And then there's the helpless, which is like, oh my God, overwhelmed, flustered, I don't know what to do, there's nothing I can do. There's the impulsive action taker. That one's me, whose first response to any problem is just take a whole bunch of action.

And then the fourth one is the rebel, basically I don't have to follow the rules, I'll do what I want. And then you have to learn what your countervailing thought is to be practicing. So if you're like me and you're an impulsive action taker, you have to be practicing I should take a minute to make a plan.

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

But I'm curious, this is just a random pop quiz. But as we've been talking about these different kind of roles, I'm curious, which of those do you think you are? If you had to pick one.

Dr. Shefali: Oh, I know myself like the back of my hand. Doesn't mean I've cured myself. But I'm definitely a giver and definitely a savior. So I see my thoughts all the time. In my head, I'll be telling myself with a client, if she's saying, for example, "I don't know how to get to Baltimore," in my head I'm like, I can help her.

Kara: I'll Google Maps that for her.

Dr. Shefali: I'll come and walk with her, or I'll drive with her. But these are just thoughts now. In the past I would have done it. Or I once had a real physical client that I talk about in my book whose car broke down and I went to - I'm a therapist. I went with her, got her car fixed, and then I'm telling my supervisor I did all this and he was like, "Are you freaking kidding me? You did not." And he was like, "Did you also have sex with her?" And I'm like, no, I did not.

Kara: You're like, that would be inappropriate, but this was a great idea.

Dr. Shefali: He was trying to say that if she had asked, you would have said, let me see if I'm also gay, I'll become gay for you, I'll do anything for you. Basically, that sense of needing to fix any pain in the other person is really an addiction. So now I watch myself.

I want to offer so many things every single day. I literally cannot pass a bus stop without wanting to get everybody in my car. But the funny thing is once it was raining in my neighborhood and I did stop to offer somebody a ride and they looked at me like, "Ew, no."

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

Kara: They were like, she's a crazy person just driving up to strangers.

Dr. Shefali: I was like, that serves me right because who stops in the middle of a rainstorm to offer - I thought it was such a nice thing to do, but obviously not. So I have to really cure my inveterate savior and I literally don't talk too much because nonsense comes out of my mouth.

Kara: I love that. I think it's so important. I mean, one thing I'm always trying to model on this podcast is as you said, it's not a destination we get to where it's all solved. And some thought patterns never go away. You just change your relationship with them and you stop acting on them and you stop making them mean so much. But your brain may always be like, "Hey, you should drive up to that stranger and offer them a ride."

Dr. Shefali: Yeah, that voice will always come and we have to talk back to the voice. We have to develop a relationship, exactly. So this book teaches you how to develop a relationship, why it's important to start doing it now and take your life back to your most authentic existence.

Kara: I love it. Alright everybody, check out Dr. Shefali's book, A Radical Awakening, available everywhere books are sold. And also on her website, which we'll put in the show notes. Do you want to tell us what the website is?

Dr. Shefali: It's drshefali.com.

Kara: It's very straightforward. That's what we say. Have clear branding. So you can find her and all of her work there and go check it out. Thank you so much for coming on.

Dr. Shefali: Thank you, my love.

UFYB 211: When Self-Development Feels Terrible: A Radical Awakening with Dr. Shefali

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