

UFYB 213: When You Don't Know What the F*ck Is Going On With Your Brain



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *Unf*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard Law School grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

So my chickens, here's what I want to talk to you about today. I want to talk to you about what happens when you just cannot figure out what the fuck is going on with yourself.

This is an experience that I am having right now and normally I really try to have worked through things and process them and kind of extracted the learning and thought about how it would apply to everybody before I teach it. But because what I want to teach right now is all about not having closure on something, I actually think it's really valuable to talk to you about what I'm experiencing right now.

And so this episode is basically me talking about what I'm experiencing with my own brain right now, in a way that is not resolved. Now, who knows, I might resolve it, it might make sense in three hours unpredictably, by the time the podcast comes out, or it may never make sense to me. And that's okay too.

So the first thing to understand is that as you get deeper and deeper into thought work and as you start to try to really access what's going on in beyond the first level stuff, you learn about thought work, your mind's totally unmanaged, you find thought work, and you sort of are like, holy shit, I can just change all these unhelpful thoughts.

So you sort of learn to believe in yourself, you learn to have a better relationship with yourself by changing your thoughts first. You learn how to not get annoyed by a bob at the office, or how to deal with the family

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drama, or how to set a minimum baseline and exercise consistently. Whatever it is you're trying to do.

There are these first and maybe even second-level problems that you're able to solve with the basic work of processing feelings and identifying and changing thoughts. And then sometimes - I don't really think there are levels to thought work, but I don't know, maybe I'm on level 12.

But I think it can happen at any level, which is why I wanted to talk about it. There are times that you just cannot quite figure out what the fuck is going on with you.

Now, I want to be really clear that you don't get to claim this exception with yourself if you haven't tried to figure it out. But sometimes, even when you try, you really can't.

So this is very different from having a thought or having a feeling or whatever, or doing a behavior and just telling yourself, "I don't know why I do it. I just don't know. I have no idea. I'm not going to try to figure it out." That's not what I'm talking about.

That is just your garden variety inertia, you need to - if you're in The Clutch, you need to write in to ask the coaches, you need to sign up to get coached on a call. If you're not, you need to talk to somebody else, one of your friends who listens to the podcast, try to do some thought work with them.

When you're in that learned helplessness of, I just don't know, I just can't figure it out, and you haven't really tried, you need to actually try. But sometimes you really tried, so I'll give you guys my example of what I'm dealing with right now.

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I am experiencing a lot of one particular emotion. For me right now it's anger. I'm experiencing a lot of anger in a relationship in my life. And it has nothing to do with the relationship.

It is - conceptually, it's clear it has nothing to do with the relationship, intellectually, it's clear. The other person is doing nothing wrong. There are no boundaries being crossed, there's no violations happening. The person is actually amazing. Our relationship is amazing, other than my anger.

But it's very clear to me that it's not coming from the relationship. Now, that's not something I would have been able to even discern, except for being this far into my thought work journey. 100% five years ago I would have thought the other person was causing it.

But where I am now, I see the other person is not causing it. It is not because of them or what they're doing. It's not because I need or want something they're not doing. It is not about them at all.

So I'm having these intense emotions come up of anger where I cannot exactly figure out what is going on. And I want to tell you that sometimes that happens, and that doesn't mean that you're therefore helpless and can't do anything about it.

Because all of the tools that you have are still useful if you approach it with curiosity. So the first and most important thing I'm doing - this took a few weeks, at first I was very resistant to it, I did not want to be having the feeling of anger, I definitely wanted the anger to go away, and so the first thing I did was get curious about my resistance.

Even if I never figured out what was going on with the anger, I could definitely figure out what was going on with my resistance to the anger. And

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so I used the processing the emotions tool to really feel what that anger felt like in my body.

I used the basic thought work tools to figure out what were my thoughts about the anger. Why was I so resistant to the anger? And I had a lot of thoughts that I was able to identify about that.

That I thought anger wasn't safe, that I, like many women and many children had not been encouraged to express appropriate anger, so I had learned that anger was unsafe, anger was unstable, people hurt each other when they're angry, or people will leave you if you're angry, when other people are angry you get hurt, if you get angry you get left.

These are things a lot of us learn, especially if we're socialized as women. And so that was the first level was noticing my resistance and using the tools on my resistance. And that took a while. Not going to lie. That's how resistance is. Sometimes it takes a while.

And then after I sort of mostly cleared that away and changed my thoughts to work on allowing the emotion, recognizing that an emotion itself is not dangerous, that just because I feel angry doesn't mean I have to act on it. The pause between the feeling and the action line, that it was okay to allow and have the feeling. That didn't mean that I would necessarily have to act on it in ways that were destructive or constructive.

And so I sort of got through that, but that didn't dissolve the underlying anger, which is still there. And so then my work was to be, and continues to be curious about it. To not be in a rush to solve it. That's just another form of resistance, thinking it needs to be over, thinking I need to solve it, thinking it needs to go away.

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All of that is actually just more subtle forms of resistance. There's the original resistance, which just feels very intense, like trying to push and shove it down, but then even if you release that, there are going to be these more subtle forms of resistance that are like, okay, I'm very determined to figure this out because I want to get rid of it, I want to resolve it, I want to understand it so it goes away.

And when you are in this place where there is something going on in your brain or your programming that you don't understand, the more you're trying to get rid of it or make it go away, the harder you are going to make it for yourself to actually understand what's going on or actually be curious about it.

And so I have been practicing as much as I can just being curious about what is happening. What does anger feel like? When does it come up? Where might it be coming from? Even deeper than that thought level, like, what does it feel like it's about?

Where I have used tools that I've gathered all along the way in my work, I have used emotional processing, I have used cognitive thought work and the thought ladder, I have used what I've learned about my nervous system and how to regulate and soothe my nervous system.

I have used what I know from the time I was in therapy with a more traditional kind of looking at your family of origin and your childhood and those systems for answers. I have used the insight I have from that experience.

I have done inner voice work with coaches, I've tried a variety of different coaching techniques with other coaches. Done some inner voice work, meaning somebody sort of takes you through a process of speaking to your inner voice.

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I've done thought work journaling, I've done talking to the person in the relationship about it. I've tried everything, but I don't say that in a way that's like, oh, I tried everything and nothing worked. I just mean I'm going to continue to be curious about this until I understand it. And that doesn't mean until it goes away.

This might be something that's going to happen forever. I don't know. There are certain things that don't change on our timeline and maybe never will change. I have no idea. I have to make peace with the idea that maybe I'm going to have these random flares of emotion, this particular emotion, for reasons that seem unconnected to what's actually going on for a while.

I don't know, maybe forever. I don't think forever because I just think we're - I mean, I haven't had them before and I think seasons come and go in your body, in your life, in your emotions. But I've had to make peace with that idea too.

The goal is not to solve and remove this. The goal is simply to understand. It's nice when understanding changes something, but sometimes it may not. And when we are sort of puzzled or perplexed, it's been fascinating because it has been so long since I did not understand something that was happening with my brain.

I have used this work, I have been always my best student and always a scholar of my own brain and my own experience. I have been relentlessly committed to understanding and evolving in my mind and my thoughts and my feelings, to living an extremely examined and intentional life.

And this has been the first time in a long time that I've been like, what the fuck is happening? Where I keep having the experience of thinking I understand it, and having what feels like a partial or full release, and then it comes right back.

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And that's fine, and this is not - I don't need suggestions or recommendations. I'm working with my own trusted coaches and advisors and maybe therapists and whoever. But I think that all of us can identify with having something that we just can't seem to work out in our thought work.

And sometimes that's because we haven't figured it out yet and it is going to resolve. We're just not skilled enough yet, we haven't learned the tool we need yet. Sometimes it's because we don't really see what's happening yet, we don't really understand it yet.

Sometimes maybe it's because it's something that's so old that we may never fully understand or shift it. But the point of thought work is not to become a perfect person who doesn't have any emotional or mental challenges, or experiences, or negative emotions.

Perfect self-knowledge is not even an achievable goal. I mean, there are psychological theorists who would say that our whole concept of identity and the self is just an illusion that our brain makes up from moment to moment so that we don't lose our minds. It helps us feel stable to pretend that we have a coherent self over time.

So full self-knowledge is not the goal. But I think where this work can always help us is how can I make peace with my current experience. How can I be where I am, how can I stop resisting, how can I embrace being confused about what is going on with me, being curious about what is going on with me.

Curious has to come with confused. If you're confused without being curious, you are fucked. Because you will just lie around in confusion forever. Confusion is okay if it comes with curiosity.

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Oh, this is so puzzling, I cannot yet figure out what is going on. Is it this? Is it that? What if I poke it this way? What if I try this thing? What if I read this book? What if I talk to that person?

Not in a frantic, I have to get better and be perfect and fix myself way, but in a I genuinely I want to understand this whether I ever can resolve it or not. I just want to know myself better, I genuinely just want to be curious about what is happening here.

And that's a practice. And I slip in and out of it, but the more that I'm able to stay in a place of true curiosity and not catastrophizing, the more I find that having this thing I can't figure out is okay. It's like carrying around a little box I don't have the key for.

Sometimes it's a little heavy and annoying and I have to carry this box around all the time, and if somebody just overnighted me the key, that would be cool. But it's okay. It's not a crisis. It's just a box I'm carrying around.

And that in itself has been such powerful work for me. Because as someone who has always been so committed to I'm going to understand this so that I can change it, I'm going to evolve, I'm going to get more skillful, and like a lot of us, I think when I first found thought work, I just took my existing perfectionism and attached it to thought work.

I need to manage all of this perfectly so I can be good enough and loved. It's been so powerful to - and I should also give credit to the other person in this relationship who holds that space for me and is willing to hold that space for me.

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But you know what, even if they weren't, it would be my job to hold that space for myself. Even if this person decided, "Listen, the fact that you get randomly angry, even though you know it's not me, even though you don't take it out on me, whatever, I just don't want to deal with it," it would still be my job to hold that space for me, to hold that loving space of that's okay and it doesn't mean something about who you are as a person, and it doesn't mean that you can't have fulfilling relationships, and it doesn't mean that you aren't good enough, or that you're doing thought work wrong, or anything else.

So of course, whatever any of you listening to this may identify with it, but it may not be a feeling that comes up in a relationship. Of course, it may be a feeling that comes up in relation to your work, or to your body, or to your - anything else in the world.

It doesn't matter what the specific context is. It's just how can you hold that loving curious space for yourself where you are curious to understand and you are committed to having compassion for yourself, but you are not desperate to get out of it, and you are willing to be in the place of not knowing what the fuck is going on with yourself on some level and not make that a problem.

Can you be a sort of curious, compassionate witness to whatever your brain and body are trying to work out? And can you create a space where your brain and body can communicate with you when they're ready about what is going on?

Sometimes I think it's almost like artists will talk about the muse visiting, but of course also talk about how you have to sit down every day consistently for the muse to visit. And insight and understanding are a little bit like that sometimes.

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Sometimes you just have to keep showing up and holding the space for it and being willing to listen and understand when the answer is willing to arise. And reading and talking to people and consulting whatever resources you can, just to sort of look at it from all the angles, but staying in that space of I want to learn more about what could be going on with me, I want to be curious about what's going on with me, but I don't have to get away from this, and I don't have to solve it. I just have to be willing to be present with it without being as reactive to it.

So that is my literally as I'm living it pep talk for those of you who are having this experience. And I'm sure that those of you who aren't right now, it already has happened before or it will happen again.

I think for all of us there are going to be times that we use all the tools we have and it helps us change our relationship to the knot, but it doesn't always release the knot when we want it to or right on schedule, and how can we be with ourselves, even in those times, even if the knot never gets released, even if never totally understand that thing, or can never totally change that behavior, or can never totally change that emotion. How can we change our relationship to it? That is always going to be really what sets us free.

Alright my chickens, for those of you who have something in your thought work where you don't know what the fuck is going on, right there with you, chicken. Happens to the best of us. Just keep being curious, keep on going. I'll talk to y'all next week.

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

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It's where you can learn new coaching tools not shared on the podcast that will blow your mind even more. And it's where you can hang out and connect over all things thought work with other podcast chickens just like you and me. It's my favorite place on earth and it will change your life, I guarantee it. Come join us at www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. That's unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. I can't wait to see you there.