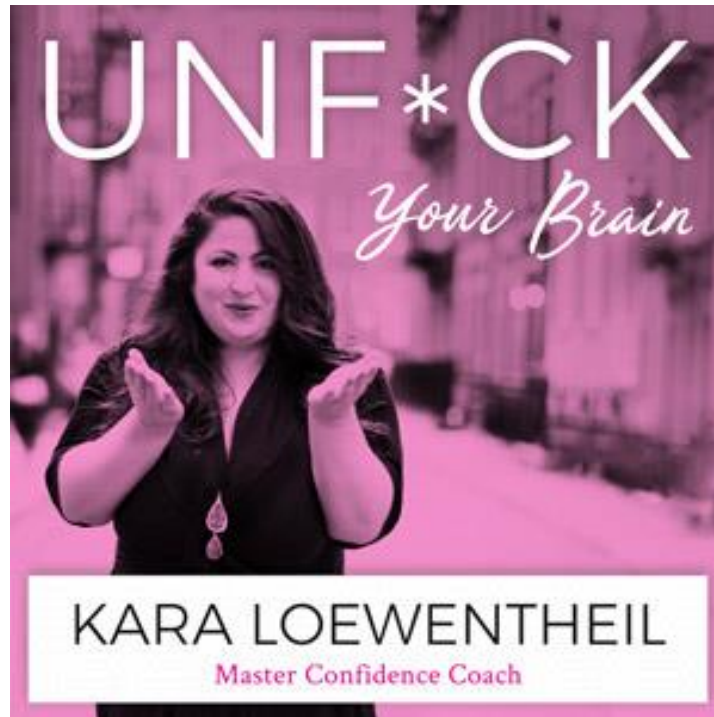


# UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

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 am super excited for this conversation today. You know that I am constantly talking about thought work and how to understand our brains, and what they're doing. And of course, I have studied and researched but also I teach a lot from my experience, what I observe in my own brain and in my students, and my clients brains. And I will defend experiential and decentralized learning till my dying day. But it is also super fun and important to understand some of the science behind what I teach.

And so today I'm having a conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf, who is a neuroscientist and an amazing researcher, and writer, and author, and podcaster, and educator who really goes deep into the neurochemistry of thought work. And what is actually happening in your brain when you use some of these thought work tools.

So, Dr. Leaf is a communication pathologist in cognitive neuroscience, she has a master's and a PhD. And she has been researching the mind brain connection since the 1980s. And she was actually one of the first in her field to study neuroplasticity with what they call directed mind input. So directed targeting neuroplasticity that you are creating on purpose with what you are trying to teach yourself to think and how to change your thoughts. So, she is an incredible resource and a real pioneer in her field. And I am so excited to have her on.

She's also the bestselling author of *Switch On Your Brain*, *Think, Learn, Succeed*, and many other books. So, we had an amazing conversation

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

about the neurochemistry of thought work and I am so excited for you all to hear it. So, without further ado here we go.

---

Caroline: Kara, it's so nice to have you back on the podcast. We were just getting going there before we'd even started. And I thought, we better start the podcast because you're already saying amazing things.

Kara: Well, there's some things we could talk about, we're off to the races.

Caroline: Exactly, we already had the podcast before the podcast kind of thing. So, let's backtrack then and welcome back to my show. And, Kara, can you just quickly briefly introduce yourself to those, most people know you but just in case. And we'll dive into some great topics.

Kara: Yeah, it's great to be back, I love when we get to chat. I am Kara Loewentheil, I'm the host of the Unf\*ck Your Brain podcast which is pretty self-explanatory given the name. I am a former social justice lawyer which I mention because we're going to be talking some about the kind of internal, external and thought work and changing the world. So, I'm a former women's rights and reproductive rights attorney who became a coach. And I call myself a feminist mindset coach.

But really what that means is I teach women how to identify how socialization has impacted their brains. And then how to rewire their mostly cognitive processes to change the way that they think about themselves. So that they can both enjoy their own lives and develop better relationships with themselves and also do whatever work it is they want to do in the world. But I think the thing that sets my work apart is sort of looking at what are the social messages we've received. How do those show up in our own thinking?

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

How do we metabolize them so they sound like they're our own voice? Where they're just accurate observations of ourselves. And then how do we shift those bit by bit to actually change our thoughts about ourselves. Because my experience when I came to this work was that there's a lot of talking about how we can all love ourselves, or like ourselves, or be our own best friend or whatever. And basically, is your explanation of how to do that in the coaching world, in the way I found it. So that's who I am.

Caroline: I love it. And it's such a great angle that you come from. And you're so right, I mean it's one of the things we discussed before we started was there's so much focus on all the things that can go wrong in our life and what we should be doing about ourselves. But how do we actually make those shifts? What are the practical steps? What does it look like? And also, the whole concept of it's not just about me, it's about me in the world.

And so, you've got to pay that forward and the research I've done has really shown that if you are going to become self-preoccupied in an attempt to make yourself great, it's counterproductive. So, it is working on yourself but it's working on yourself with the intent of understanding the impact that you bring to the world and that you have on the world. And then sort of humanizing all that and holding to your mind, brain, body.

So, we're going to dive into a few of those topics today. But let's start with something right off the top. You actually put up a post today, I think it was today's post. What would happen if we stop looking outside ourselves to be secure and emphatically decided to root for our damn selves.

Kara: Yeah, that's my coach, Brig Johnson, to give credit where credit is due, one of coaches, yes.

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

Caroline: Yes, credit, yeah, there we go, yeah, Brig Johnson, okay. I just love that because it kind of, as you introduced yourself, it just triggered that. I mean you said something similar the other day. I mean you talk about this all the time, so just talk around...

Kara: A one track record.

Caroline: Yeah. Well, no, it's excellent. So just let's talk about that. Let's start in that space. Let's talk about the fact that there is all this advice out there and we are being encouraged to find ourselves and believe in ourselves. And this is not something new. But what is new is how do you actually do it? What's the translation? What does that look like in real life?

Kara: Yeah. So, I think that's such an important, and I think that's starting the conversation with where it does make sense to look internally before we talk about how that can go into overdrive. So, I think there's two things. And I think I even talked about this the last time we spoke. I think one of the things that I spend a lot of time teaching about and I have an episode on my podcast called The Thought Ladder is how we can actually incrementally change our thoughts bit by bit. And so, I will give the very brief process that I teach.

But I think that was one of the big things that was missing to me when I came to this work was, I was like, "Okay, well, if I hate my body and I look in the mirror and I'm supposed to think I'm a beautiful goddess, I am not getting any payoff from that." I can say any sentence in my mind with human words. I can say to myself, the lizard king came from space and rules us all. I can think that. But I don't believe that so there's no emotional connection to it. It's just saying gobbledygook in my brain.

And that's what some of those positive affirmations felt like because they were so far from what I was experiencing. And I do think there are some

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

people who are able, who are very disciplined I guess and can just repeat a thing they don't believe for a year and eventually believe it. But I am not like that. I need sooner payoff. And so, I really worked out, what is the most tiniest step thought I can think that is a little bit better? Sometimes I joke that this comes from being Jewish where we're just like, "What would be a tiny bit better than terrible?"

And so going from I hate my body to I'm an amazing goddess, no. Going from I hate my stomach to this is a human stomach is a neutral thought, I have to believe it. It's definitely true. But it doesn't feel amazing. I'm not lit up with self-esteem when I think that. But I'm also not pushing myself further down when I think that. It's a little less suffering. So, I teach those kinds of cognitive techniques which I think are really important.

But the other thing that I think, sometimes what women do and I see this in the coaching industry so much as is, so, we come into coaching, we figure out that we're perfectionists and we want everything to be perfect. And we think that we have to hustle for our own worth and our own lovability. We have to be perfect to deserve anything good in the world. And so, then this weird thing happens where people get coached that the solution to that is to believe that everything that's happened is perfect because it happened for a reason. And we are perfect the way we are.

And I just feel that's not the only option. It's you're collapsing it into the only solution would be to then think you are perfect and the world is perfect. As opposed to...

Caroline: Black and white thinking.

Kara: Yeah. What does it mean to have a relationship with yourself where you can even acknowledge when you have acted out of alignment with your values or when you have been complicit in some harm. I'm talking into

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

a microphone that I don't know, I'm pretty sure it wasn't manufactured by somebody who's making \$50,000 a year and gets healthcare and a United States union run factory. I mean maybe it was but probably not. I'm complicit in all these huge social systems of oppression. And I am doing my work on them.

But how can I have a relationship with myself where I don't have to pretend the world is perfect or believe I am perfect in order to still have my own back and have a positive relationship with myself? And that is the thing I'm obsessed with teaching right now because I see so many women who are coming through the coaching industry and it's like what they have been fed is this, just a different form of black and white thinking that feels better. But it's actually not open to complexity and nuance.

Caroline: I absolutely 100% agree with you. And it's really fun to take it from a different angle because I come from the sort of neuroscientific, clinical and neuroscience and all that stuff. But it's the same message. It's this whole message we have to realize that we're human and that it's okay. It's like Thomas Edison said, it's not that I've failed, it's I've learned a 1,000 things that don't work. It's all we're able to or confident enough to embrace that messiness and actually do something with it and see it's okay.

It's okay to have made these mistakes, as long as you don't stay there. So, we're not talking about staying there obsessively. We're not talking about trying to convince ourselves that we are the goddess. We are actually being very realistic about what does that mean in our life and how can we actually change that. So, you're talking about the whole positive affirmation thing, you're quite right, has been for years. It's shifted from oppression to the other side of you're amazing and to say all these positive affirmations.

And a large part of that, just write it down and believe it, and it's going to happen in the secret law of attraction. I mean this is the most unscientific



## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

stuff. And only a few people really – it can put people in a tremendous place of condemnation, what's wrong with me as an individual? And what have I done wrong? Am I doing something wrong? Meanwhile it's not that you've done something wrong, it's just that there's this massive gap in between as you say, there's a whole lot of little steps in between. And why is only that way of doing it the only way?

And then coming to affirmations, the cognitive dissonance that occurs, you cannot, I can tell you as a neuroscientist, there is no ways that you can stand up there and say even if it's for a year that I am a goddess and believe that because it's cognitive dissonance. Because the truth is that you believe one thing, I think you saw my little toxic trees. That thought of how you see yourself is there. So, no matter how many times I try and replace it with I am the goddess, this is still there.

So, what we have to do is we have to embrace that and reconceptualize that. We have to reconstruct that. And we have to then say, "Okay, well, what's a realistic version? And that takes time. So, the other thing that I love what you said is the time it takes, the teeny, little steps in between. And that's where you cannot rewire your mind brain connection in these little positive affirmation daily statements, or a quick fix, or these five steps and voila, the mold of this person. Or I'll write it down and believe that it's going to come to me.

It is cycles of time and that's, we have done research showing it's cycles of 63 days which I think we spoke about before which are called the ultimate time something. And it may be multiple, you may need – I mean I've had some patients that took two/three years before they felt that they had this crushing whatever and that destroyed how they were functioning, moving to something that was more positive. So, I'm just saying the science behind what you...



## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

Kara: That's so important because people will talk about how long it can take. And it's like people get fed up and they think it's not working. And they hop to the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing. And if you had just stuck with that process in the beginning, at the end of three years you'd be somewhere as opposed to, well, first I tried this and then I got that. And then I tried that. And then I tried that because nothing is delivering that quick fix.

And I think that expectation that it's supposed to be – I have somebody in my life right now who sort of is, is going through these phases where they were sort of begrudgingly doing some self-awareness work and going to therapy. And then they actually had a huge up-leveling where they got the kind of magic of it. And were like, "Oh my God, I actually understand what's happening. Whoa, things are making connections." And then the next day they have a whole crash of, wait, but then I'll have to give up who I am and I don't know if I want to do that.

And all this normal resistance came up and that's all normal and part of the process. We are sold this journey that's like you just get more and more spiritually evolved as you go. Enlightenment, there's the smooth path that's going to be like, can be fast and easy. And I think again that's that same perfectionism and inability to have any negative emotion or tolerate any distress, or it's normal. All those images are really true. You think it's going to be a straight line and it's a squiggly line.

Yeah, the one I always like is I actually have always loved – it's an elliptical loop image. That's what I always think about because it is, you go forward and then you've got to go back, and then you go forward. Over time you're getting it, you're moving forward, you are making progress. But I think that point about 63 days is bare minimum if you're super lucky with that one client.

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

Caroline: Exactly. But, Kara, I'll have people who say to me, "Oh my gosh, I can't even think in 63 days. I can think in five days." So okay, well, that's fine, let's think in five days but let's see where you stop after five days, the work you've done for five days, pretty much converts to heat energy in your brain. So, you have a vague memory of maybe I was there but now you feel worse about yourself because I did that but it didn't work. But did it not work?

And the other side as well is we get something called the treatment effect and I showed in the cycles that we go through rewiring the mind brain connection, you get this peak around 21 days. And as you build from day five, there's certain days, it's at four, seven, 14, 21, 42, 63, there's certain points where these things happen. And day five is where the emotions tend to go haywire, we say, "This is too much, I can't do this." And it's often the day people will stop.

Then they get to day 14 for example where it's, okay, things are now flying. I've got this, I'm fine but they haven't stabilized anything. And then they get to day 21 and between 14 and 21 there's generally a lot of revelation that's very overwhelming so people have that massive, you know, that cycle going backwards. And that's when people think. And so, I've had people in my clinical trials and things saying things like, "Oh gosh, I got worse. I got more depressed as I went through learning how to manage my mind in these little, tiny steps."

But the difference was because they understood it they said it was okay. It was a worse depression and anxiety but it wasn't that I am depressed or emotions are not illnesses, they are messengers. They said, "It's different. I'm actually feeling depressed", because also it's progress and that's key. And that's what you were saying there as well. That seeming dip, it still means you've shifted. If you see that dip and think oh gosh, we did those

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

five steps, I'm not where that person is on the stage or wherever, the person out there who's saying all these wonderful things.

They're also going through the dips but they don't always tell you about them. But you haven't gone backwards because every step is progress forward.

Kara: That's so important because part of it is like, I think that that attitude of it has to be always moving forward is exactly because we don't have this compassionate relationship with ourselves. And we can look at it from the outside and be like, "Yeah, of course, of course it's normal." That if you start changing a bunch of stuff that you've relied on, you're going to have resistance, you're going to feel worried about it or whatever. I think when we're in the rush to 'get better' or the rush to change, it's because we think it'll be better there.

Once I fix my mind then I won't have to feel a human negative emotion. I'll never feel bad about myself.

Caroline: Oh my gosh, it's just starting.

Kara: Yeah. No one is living long enough to get to that. Maybe if we were immortal our brains would get there but I still doubt it. Because I think that the constant monitoring of our progress also is this sort of very – I don't know. There's something, it feels industrially about it. We're like efficiency consultants or something.

Caroline: Well, neoliberalism I mean it's the whole thing. You've got to be productive.

Kara: Right. You've got to be producing your change on a regular consistent [crosstalk] as opposed to you're an animal with a very big brain

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

trying to make sense of the world. And it's not going to always be a smooth ride. And okay, you pull back and I think for some people are able to do that with meditation is effective, or some people they do different forms of self-inquiry, inquiry with a practitioner.

But whatever model you're using because a lot of them I think are doing the same thing. It's just getting some perspective on well, what would I say. When a kid learns a new task they're not, "I learned to tie my shoes my perfectly easily and consistently, and I didn't get frustrated at all. And it wasn't hard and I didn't ever screw it up and give up." When a child is having trouble you wouldn't scream at them, "You're so fucking stupid, you've got to get better at this right now." But that's how we talk to ourselves.

Caroline: Exactly. That self-critique is really harsh and it's because you've got this distorted, I think, perception of what success looks like. I always get asked that question, I'm sure you do too, when I'm interviewed, "What does success look like?" I said, "It's having the peace inside yourself to deal with the ups and downs." So, if I'm feeling I'm having a bad day or something's not working in the business or a relationship, one of those dives. I don't see it as going backward, I see it as going forward so I can accept that.

And I think when we get to the point where we can accept that sense of peace, that we can accept that we can move forward into resilience. And that's another thing that I've been working, resilience is such a popular word. So, if you really look at what resilience is, we've kind of been sold this philosophy that if you have five traits, these are the traits of resilience, of seven traits or 12 traits or whatever. And what's super interesting about the resilience research, and it goes to the whole sort of wired, for life, survival, nature that we have as humans to get through stuff.

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

We see that people are a lot more resilient than what they are told in this current day and age where we're told that we're so weak, we can't cope, you need all this help. Every emotion is like you've got problems.

Meanwhile let's just embrace it, find the message and through move it. As hard as it is, that does grow you. And so, what's super interesting about resilience is that if you may get through something and you can go and analyze, okay, I got through this because of x, y and z, and you learn from that.

But now the next struggle comes along and the opposite of those actually work. Those [crosstalk] something different.

Kara: Yeah. Sometimes you need to push and sometimes you need to rest. But we all want there to be one answer that's like I always have to do this or I always have to do that. And I think this is one of the things, people are often like, "There's so many coaches. Why do we need so many? Or aren't people all doing the same thing", or whatever. And I'm like, "People just need totally different approaches." Everybody is coming from a different place and what works amazingly for someone else might not work for you.

So, I mean my teacher, I feel teaches a lot on you've got to get up and get moving and work hard and all the stuff which is really necessary for people who have been sitting in kind of, I can't do anything, I'm not capable, I have never tried. But then I search and noticed in my students, I was like, "Whoa, you people need to slow down and take a nap." I attracted people like you were.

Caroline: Energizer buddy.

Kara: Yeah, highly educated, overachievers who are constantly striving and doing things and doing things. And their problem is they have to learn the doing of the things will not bring you peace, will not make you like yourself,

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

will not whatever. So, when people ask me how I – when I am defining success when I’m coaching somebody around this stuff, I am like, “If you are nice to yourself then it’s literally all I care about.”

Caroline: I love that.

Kara: And it’s not self-referential. What people fear is they’re nice to themselves they’ll just do nothing, feel good about it, never help anyone else and sit on the couch. And that’s not what happens, which we can talk about. But for me I would much rather that you never do any more thought work again, don’t do anything else I teach but be nice to yourself, and not having done it than follow everything I teach and beat yourself up the whole time for not doing it well enough.

Caroline: Yeah, that’s brilliant. That’s absolutely critical. It’s that whole thing of if you look at what kindness does to you, it’s the same thing. It’s being kind to ourself. It’s the first thing and I used to say that to my patients all the time. And over the years in just what I do, I don’t coach people directly because it’s more indirect. But it’s a comment that I make often. And there’s a few people I work with individually but the first thing I always also say is, “Listen, kindness to yourself changes your neural structures. It changes your mind, brain, body.”

And if you’re not kind to yourself you’re actually going to be mean to other people. And you can be reactive. So, it’s not self-preoccupation. You are not telling people to become self-preoccupied because that actually is, as I mentioned already, is counterproductive.

Kara: When you’re nice to yourself you think a lot less about yourself. I’m always busting this bubble.

Caroline: You become humble, yes, thank you, thank you.

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

Kara: People think they're going to become arrogant.

Caroline: No, it's the opposite.

Kara: And I'm like, "Who thinks the most about themselves? Someone extremely self-loathing." Because when you're self-loathing you're constantly taking inventory of all the shit that's wrong with you and what's not good about you. And everything you experience you relate back to what's wrong with you. People who actually like themselves, think about – I have a friend I love. I don't sit around thinking all day about her. But when you hate someone you're really preoccupied with them then you ruminate on them all the time. And the same thing is true with yourself.

Caroline: Exactly. That's such a good point because it really is like that. And you look at all those things that you hate about yourself it can manifest as trying to, you know, you take the opposite. And think, well, if I boast about that, if I get people to like me. So, someone who's trying so hard, they don't have that sense of kindness and being nice to yourself. So, I totally agree that that is a starting point. And I love how you said, it actually makes you less – I don't know what your word was, but in the region of having humility.

Because I always say the test of not being self-preoccupied is humility. So, if you are loving yourself and being kind to yourself, your humility increases and you just become a much nicer person to be around versus if you're self-preoccupied, humility goes, you get arrogant as a coping mechanism.

Kara: Yeah. I think we have to really explain what humility is. Because women and people of color, and people with marginalized identities are so socialized to be humble which I think is different.

Caroline: Yeah, let's define that, thank you, let's define the difference.



## UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf

Kara: Women often will shame themselves and call that being humble.

Caroline: Not humble.

Kara: That's not what humble – humility means – to me I think of it as almost just like curiosity. It just means thinking that, for me, that we're all of equal worth and value, that I don't need to be above anyone else. And I'm not below anyone else. No one else is above me either in worth or value. And I don't need to – I think, to me, humility involves curiosity because I think of it in terms often of just being not assuming you know everything, not feeling you're supposed to know everything, not feeling your ego or worth is dependent on you knowing and being the best and all of these things.

So, you just are much more like, what's happening outside of me. I don't always have the answer. I don't always know. I don't have to be the best at everything. I'm also not the worst at everything. It just is a sort of much more kind of, I think, neutral vantage point on the world, but people think that arrogance is up here, thinking you're amazing. And then humility is down here thinking you're terrible.

So, I always want to just qualify it because I don't want people listening, especially if they live in marginalized identities where they're told to be humble, to hear it. And be like, "Good, yeah, so I am terrible and bad and that's me being humble", which is a [crosstalk].

Caroline: Yeah. I am so glad that you defined that because it's so true, because humility is definitely not that. Humility is the ability to recognize that no one's my competition because I myself am enough. And if I support someone else and I get excited about someone else I'm actually enhancing myself. And it doesn't detract from me, it's actually enhancing me to be excited and not threatened by others. And it's rejoicing in oneself to the

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

point where you get excited about others and about taking whatever, it is that you bring to the world and lifting others as well as yourself.

So, if you're not you're shooting yourself in the foot, and I'm so terrible, and I'm so bad and all that stuff.

Kara: This happens every time we chat.

Caroline: I know, I just get so excited. I know, we [crosstalk], I love it. I love it.

Kara: One of the things I notice, so many women will tell you these really self-critical thoughts but they don't even know that they're self-criticism. They just think that they're accurately reporting their personality to you or being humble, or being realistic about themselves. And so, all of that stuff can get so tort. To me, when you believe that everyone is equally worthy and then your worth is not tied to your accomplishment, or your appearance, or whatever else, then all the rest of it relaxes. It doesn't really matter.

Caroline: Yeah, it does, it changes.

Kara: It's like they're better at tennis than you, or your sister-in-law makes more money, or whatever.

Caroline: You can enjoy that, you can enjoy for them because I mean as soon as you celebrate your sister-in-law making more money, or that tennis player who plays better than you, or whatever. You actually enhance your own brain health and your own intelligence increases. And no one's telling people that except probably you and I and maybe a few other people. But it really does, you as a person become much healthier mentally and

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

physically. And so that's a really good thing, that we're in a world that's all about competition.

And I'm not anti-competition when it's done correctly. Competition should be more a growth process as opposed to putting someone down so that you can be better.

Kara: It's inspiration versus competition.

Caroline: Exactly, inspiration, yeah.

Kara: I always see in my students, I get more excited about when I have let's say coaches who are working in their business and their thought process. And I don't only coach coaches or only teach coaches, I just use this example because it often strikes me. They'll get their first client or make their first \$10,000 or whatever, and they're shitting on themselves. And I'm like, "Think about how much money." I am so excited for them and I actually think that's part of why I have been able to create what I've created.

Is that I worked on being excited for myself and now I get excited for everybody else. But it's so interesting to me.

Caroline: It's genuine. It's authentic.

Kara: Yeah. And it's so interesting to me to see that genuinely I am more excited about their \$10,000 than they are. Because they're just going, "Well, I was trying to make 20, I was trying to make 100. I haven't gotten there yet." Or, "So and so from my class is doing this." Whereas I'm like, "The way you're going to get there is by being excited about this in any area of your life."

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

Caroline: So good, I love that.

Kara: If you are dating, the way you are going to get to the great relationship you want is by being excited about the dates even if you decide not to see the person again, even if they're not the right match. It doesn't mean just literally date the first person who comes along. But enjoying and being excited about, and looking for the good in the process is how you make yourself better at dating and make it more enjoyable. And make yourself better able to connect to people. And that's how you build up to get that relationship you want.

Shitting on the process and yourself is very hard to find a great relationship when all of your thoughts are, I'm bad and terrible, and nobody wants me, and dating is horrible, and I hate all these people.

Caroline: And that is what's going to come up because that's what's wired into your brain, into every cell of your body. It's in your mind, your gravitational field, so you go into that date and that's what pulls out. So, you're smiling and talking but what's coming at that person is this contradictory vibe. And that's what, non-verbal communication is 50%. What we are thinking is generating a 100% impact on that other person. And it kind of counters what you're actually physically saying and messes up the whole thing.

So, it's being as authentic as possible and that doesn't mean pouring your heart out to every single person on Instagram. It means really being honest with yourself, authenticity starts with you being honest with yourself and facing those issues, and that's linked to the humility thing because it actually leads to self-confidence as opposed to self-esteem then.

Kara: I definitely found when I was – before I met my current partner, when I was doing all this work on dating. By the end I would go on dates and the

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

other person at the end would be very confused if I was like, “Well, this was great, but no thank you.” Because I had been so – not in a leading on way but I had just been myself, but actually happy, and charming, and excited about it because I was doing that on purpose. And then it was like they were surprised because people think that it’s the other person. But it’s not the other person, it’s you. You have to bring that energy into it.

And when you are thinking in that way that we’re describing, you also can’t see. If your idea about dating is it’s hard, one, it doesn’t work. Then when somebody who actually likes you and is available comes along you literally won’t even be able to perceive it because your thought is that it doesn’t work and it’s not possible.

Caroline: So, if we love ourselves, not in that self-preoccupied sense but in the sense that we’re describing, there is a perspective that we can look at things with enjoyment, we can look at things differently, you get that kind of space there which is amazing.

You talk a lot and you mentioned that in the beginning from your background was in the legal side and so on. And this is something that I know we spoke about last time but it bears repeating because it goes to how women are so harsh and critical on themselves. And that is the social norms of what a woman should be and how that’s been so wired into society in black and white in just women in general. Can you talk a little bit more about that because I know you’re a big voice around that?

Kara: Yeah. So, I think that when I came into coaching I felt there was a lot of discussion about how, I sort of think of this, obviously extremely oversimplified. But that’s just to help people think about the different levels. I felt sort of traditional talk therapy, especially that’s where we get this idea which I think is true, that your early family experiences, your early

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

childhood experiences impact how you think, how your nervous system is wired etc., totally true.

Then we have, coaching was very – at least the kind of coaching that I liked was focused on evolutionary biology which again can get overlapped and also there's some truth to it. It is useful to understand. When your nervous system is being startled, when you're having a threat response, fight or flight, all of that is useful. But there was nature and nurture sort of. But then there wasn't social nurture. And obviously some of the things your society believes about people will come in through your family, you'll get some of it there. But that's not the only place.

So, if you grow up in a society in which men are considered smarter than women on general on average, in a social stereotype. You're not just getting that from your family. And your brain is developing beyond just what your family impact is on and just what biology impact is on, you were also absorbing messages constantly, explicit and implicit. And I think that's part of what's hard for a lot of even younger feminists sometimes to see is – or to understand how it would impact their brains.

I didn't grow up in a family where I was told that men were smarter than women. I grew up in a Jewish family very focused on education. I was expected to have an amazing career and to prioritize that. But that doesn't matter. I mean, it's not that that doesn't matter, that was helpful but I'm still living in a world where most of the CEOs are men. And most of the people in the government are men. And most of the brilliant minds on TV are men. We're having movies about men who win Nobel Prizes in mathematics and not women.

We're just getting all of that messaging. And so, I think that some people are not even thinking of or aware of that and so bringing that into awareness is important. Some people are aware that that's happening. So,

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

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

I came into it as somebody who was very aware of systems and oppression. And by systems and oppression I just mean a social system in which one group has benefits over another group. It has more power over another group. I was very aware of that but awareness was not changing my thought process.

And I think that's because what happens is, if what happened was that you woke up every morning and you heard a male announcer voice in your head, be like, "Women are only worth what they look like." You would relate to it as an intrusive external thing you didn't want to agree with. That's not what happens. What happens is you get up and you look in the mirror and you think, I look bloated. I don't look good today. Now I don't feel confident. I'm not good enough. Maybe I shouldn't go on this date. I mean it doesn't literally metabolize it obviously.

But as a metaphor, it's like your brain metabolizes all that input and then it comes out in your own voice. So, you just think it's true. And you just think it's realistic or you just think it's because of your family or whatever else. And so, to me I think the important piece that had been missing was how do we learn to identify when socialization is impacting our thought process? And then how do we learn to change those thoughts?

And sometimes it is – I mean it's always baby step thought work but sometimes it is the personal stuff you learn from your family. Or it's learning to soothe your nervous system which is kind of a biological issue. But sometimes it's like, oh shit, I see that, even though I would never consciously say I believe a woman's appearance is the most important thing about her, I notice that as I'm getting older, I've started thinking that I'm not important anymore. Now I've got to change that thought.

So that is really the core of my work is how do we identify that socialization? It's very sneaky because it just sounds like our voice. And it



## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

sounds like believing what – one of the most insidious ways that oppression works on us mentally and this is that intersection between coaching and changing the world work. So, patriarchy tells us, let's say that women are not good enough. It's harder to get ahead as a woman. And then when we recognize that the social structures may be that it's harder to get ahead in certain fields as a woman.

Then we think that to believe we can do it, or to tell someone they can do it is being in denial of the social reality. So, we get into this weird space where we don't recognize that, yes, the oppressive system has created some unfairness. And we can recognize that that unfairness exists, but when we let that unfairness dictate what we think we can accomplish or who we can become, we are actually doing the system's work for it. You are doing the oppressor's work for the oppressor when you internalize that and believe that.

And that was the nuance that I felt was missing, it's not, my brand of coaching is not the world is perfect. My grandparents generation was in the holocaust. I'm not like, "That was great. Perfect." And Viktor Frankl who was a holocaust survivor, wrote that book, Man's Search for Meaning, was one of my biggest coaching inspirations. Because it's like this is not frivolous stuff. This is the world is unfair and unequal. There are amazing beautiful things in the world and there are horrible things in the world.

And how are we as people, as humans trying to get through this world going to show up to, yeah, acknowledge reality, I'm not like, "Well, if you jump out of the window and you believe you can fly then you will if you just manifest it." Gravity exists. But how are we going to create that resilience we're talking about? How are we going to create that flexibility? How are we going to create that emotional center inside of us so that we can navigate it?

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

And if we just accept, recognizing systems of oppression is important. But then sometimes as a former social justice professional, that goes to a black and white extreme place too of complete structuralism, we're all powerless. And nobody can do anything about anything on an individual level. It's basically it's revolution or bust, that's it. We've got to get everybody total solidarity for a revolution or nothing will change. And to me that's not true either. And I just went on a 10 minute tirade.

Caroline: No, it's excellent. It's excellent. And my brain's going click, click, click. And I can see five hours of conversations coming.

Kara: Yes, [crosstalk].

Caroline: Yeah. So, no, what you said there is just absolutely – it's fabulous and it's so relevant. And just taking it from the top and then going down, when you talk about how our societal immersion has created these thought patterns that we believe – we don't even realize that they're in us. And what you try and do is try and say, "Well, why do you believe it? Where is it actually coming from?" And so, this is where our work crosses over so well.

So, from a neuroscientific side is that if you bathe in that immersion as a child in a family, then in culture, then in a society that's telling you, "Listen, x, y and z about being a woman, or x, y and z about being black versus white etc." All the different things that we can talk about. And you're hearing that all the time, every experience that you have is being processed by your mind into your brain and your body, so in three places. And so, I love your examples of the social thing. That's why I brought this whole thing up.

Because those things about what women have been told that they are, that's a [inaudible] we've heard for too long. And those are being triggered but we haven't questioned them because they feel so much part of us. And they are producing this feeling of, hey, something's wrong here. I'm being

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

held back. Which is the conversation we are having in this day and age. Then we need to go back and restructure.

And that is a combination of me learning how to deal with what society's done to me as well as then – and this goes to the point you made earlier on. Which is I've come full circle coming back to that point is how do we translate that into the greater societal good? So, you say people with either good revolution or nothing. But actually, you said something that is so true and close to my heart which triggered this whole discussion which is it starts with us being kind to ourselves. It starts with us understanding why we are thinking in that way. How can we work on ourselves?

And in that way naturally we're going to pull out into society and then you get a groundswell forming, which is what's happened. Look at the difference with women's rights now versus in the 50s. It's taken a long time and it's still got a long way to go. But the groundswell did shift the thing. And racism, it's still got a long way to go. But there is a shift. And so, it does take the individual to make the societal change. That's how if I read you correctly, I think that's what you were saying. We're going to solve at the same time as also making sure you translate that growth in you back into society.

Kara: Yeah, absolutely. I mean any social change has to come from a human mind. So, it doesn't make any sense. We can only imagine a world currently with the brains that we have. And if our brains are completely infiltrated with the social messaging that we don't want to replicate then it's going to be very challenging to see the world in a new way. The more that we free ourselves of the messages that we have absorbed the more we can unlock, I think, different creative ways of seeing and solving problems. And that's what socialization is all about .

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

Caroline: Exactly, and that's what that does. So, we see what's locked us in and we reconceptualize it to – we deconstruct and reconstruct to work with work forward. And as we grow that it has a very quick effect so that's the good side, because it sounds so hopeless. Because how can me as one person or you as one person, or the people's lives you touch, the people's lives I touch, how can we change thousands of years of wrong treatment of women for example?

But because it's coming from the right space which is that middle of the forest, which is the natural humanity of us is to survive, and to love, and to share, and it's actually quicker to grow the healthy. So once the good starts it goes like a wildfire quicker than the negative, even though we don't feel that. Once you get the good stuff going it does have a wildfire effect.

Kara: People have no idea what they're actually capable of. I mean we look at people who have changed the world and we think that they're extraordinary and different from us. They're different from us in some way but a lot of what's different about them is just their thoughts about what's possible and what kind of impact they can have.

Caroline: Exactly. Each and every one of us is extraordinary. And that's not the motivational, you can do it and I can kind of message. It is much more realistic and that there is something that you can do that no one else can do. And it is extraordinary. And it's very enhancing. And if we can try and lift that up and it starts with what you said right in the beginning, being nice to yourself, being gentle and kind. And that starts with you then being able to, okay, this is where this has come from, how can I say that differently?

So, you shift and then your shift affects your circle. And then that circle keeps growing bigger and bigger and the change happens, that's how I see it.

## **UFYB 229: The Neurochemistry of Thought Work: A Conversation with Dr. Caroline Leaf**

Kara: I think that was the beautiful conclusion.

Caroline: That's the beautiful conclusion for part two. But part three, four, five, six probably part 100 coming up.

Kara: Still coming, yes.

Caroline: Still coming so watch this space. Kara, this has been amazing. I love talking to you so let's do this again soon and thank you so much and watch this space, we'll be back again the two of us to take these things even deeper. Thanks so much.

—

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 Unf\*ck Your Brain. It's where you can get individual help applying the concepts to your own life.

It's where you can learn new coaching tools not shared on the podcast that will blow your mind even more. And it's where you can hang out and 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](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). That's [unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch](http://unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). I can't wait to see you there.