

UFYB 234: How To Stop Being Defensive



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.

My chickens, the wait is over. The Clutch is finally finally reopening to the public soon. We've gotten emails, we've gotten DMs, we've gotten comments on our social media posts. We have been working behind the scenes to create an incredible new Clutch experience. I am beyond excited, it's like Christmas day except I'm Jewish so I've never celebrated Christmas. But when you see the movies, the big tree with all the piles of presents, that's what this feels like.

We have redesigned and revamped the entire experience so that you can dive deep into courses and modules on any topic you want to work on. I have re-recorded so much new, not re-recorded, just recorded so much new teaching, so many new tools, so many new lessons on all the areas that really impact women's lives and where our socialization holds us back in our relationships, at work, in our parenting, in our family lives, when it comes to our money mindset, when it comes to promoting ourselves, when it comes to our relationships with ourselves, our bodies, food, movement, all the things.

We have new incredible courses on all of those topics with new teaching, new coaching exercises and workbooks. The new member site is beautiful, so organized, it is just a dream come true.

So we are going to be opening access to it again soon. This will be a very short open period. Don't sleep on this. We will be open for sign up just for a few days because we really want to get everybody who's been ready and waiting in there, and then were going to close the doors again so we can really focus on taking everybody who joins through the experience, setting you up for success, making sure you have everything you need, you've got

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all the coaching and support you need, you know exactly what to do when, we are going to take you through that whole process and we really want to focus on our new class of Clutch students.

So here's how you get on the waitlist so that you are the first to find out when we open so that you do not miss this. Go to unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch all one word to get on the waitlist and you can also text your email if you want to +1-347-997-1784 that's +1-347-997-1784 and when you're promoted you can send the codeword is The Clutch. It can be one word, can be two words, it doesn't matter

If you were in The Clutch and you left but you think this sounds cool and you want to come back and check it out, you absolutely should. It is such an incredibly upleveled and amazing experience. Those folks already in The Clutch are getting the first peek at it very very soon.

But we will, be able to offer it to everyone for a few days of open registration coming up in May. So you'll get the exact details when we announce to the public. First and foremost, if you are on that waitlist. So again, unfuckyourbrain.com/clutch or you can text your email to +1-347-997-1784, code word is the clutch. I cannot wait to see you there.

Hello my chickens, how are you? I wanted to say, I started writing these notes yesterday, that spring had sprung in New York. But today it is cold and raining so fuck that noise. Although I did actually write, that means winter's right around the corner again. And indeed, that is correct. So, it's winter again today but that's okay.

Alright, so I am really excited to talk about this topic and teach about this. I have been thinking a lot about defensiveness lately. It's a topic that's been coming up in my self-coaching, in some of the advanced programs I teach,

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my advanced certification in feminist coaching. and just watching how people interact with the world at large. I want to preface this by saying this is an issue I have worked on a lot in my life. I am not a naturally non-defensive person. I was extremely defensive for most of my life until last year.

And it's really only that I've been able to work through it some and start working through it since I discovered coaching personally and professionally. That's definitely what I was, either I came out of the womb like or was raised into being. I just was very defensive. And I think whether you may be naturally inclined that way or you picked that pattern up somewhere. It is such an intense experience. And I think it can be so blocking to our growth. And that's why it's really important to talk about it.

And I really notice the difference because recently I got some feedback on two podcast episodes I had done that was, I think you can call legitimately, I mean critical is such a loaded word. But it was pointing out things I had missed. So, I call that critique and that doesn't bother me. I don't think critique means somebody had a negative motivation. I come from academia, critique is just, hey, you're missing this point in your argument. That argument doesn't make sense or you're making a logical error, or you're ignoring this objection that you need to counter, or whatever.

So, critique to me is just critical in the sense of intellectual criticism, not you're a bad person, just hey, you missed this lens, you missed this point, this doesn't hold up, what about this counter example, etc. So, I got feedback on two of my podcast episodes. One was the episode that I did recently with Susan Hyatt about emotional labor.

And I'm going to do a follow-up episode because I think we didn't touch on an important topic which is what one of my students offered to me as feedback, which was the ways in which for certain communities, especially communities of color. There's so much surveillance and policing that

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happens through things like the school system or foster, child protective services, the police system that there can be very serious consequences for letting small things slip with your children especially.

If you send your kids to school and they don't have a lunch one day because your partner was supposed to do the lunches and you're sort of letting them fail and learn. That kind of thing, that there can be much more serious consequences. And it's sort of only people with a certain kind of privilege who can do that without worrying. So that's an example of some feedback I got.

And then in conversation about that episode, I got feedback on another episode about kind of the different dangers different communities face for kind of standing out or being different. So those were both totally legitimate, valid, useful critiques of the work that I put out. And I'm going to be doing some follow-ups to explore that stuff more.

In the context of this episode what was so shocking to me was I went through these conversations just normally. And only afterwards did I realize, holy shit, I actually just had an entire experience where somebody critiqued my work from a perspective that's very meaningful to me which is having a social justice lens, intersectional oppression, awareness and inclusivity. Those are values I have. So was a critique from people whose opinion I care about and respect, both of whom are my students, on a kind of sensitive topic.

And I did not feel defensive. I felt the tiniest tickle of reaction and that was it. And in the past I would have just felt flooded with shame, just so defensive, so ashamed. I would have been arguing with it in my head but then also trying to act with a lot of urgency to fix it. I would have just felt so defensive. And so, I realize that wow, I think I really can teach something about this now I am on the other side in a different way than I ever have

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been before. That's not to say I never get defensive, I'm sure I do. Occasionally my partner says something, I feel defensive.

But I want to teach you guys how to recognize defensiveness and how to relax defensiveness because it is such a growth blocker. And it really is so connected to perfectionism and perfectionistic thinking, and black and white thinking, and self-criticism. All the trends that we talk about on this podcast all the time. So, I really think it's a crucial skill in your self-development, as a person, as a human, professionally, in your personal relationships. And just as a person living in a really diverse world, to be able to hear different experiences or opinions without feeling defensive or attacked.

And when I say without feeling those things, it's totally okay that you feel those things, no feelings are wrong or bad. So, I'm not saying, you're already failing it. I just mean we can work on our skillfulness in receiving critique, opinions, thoughts, information from other people. And work on our ability to hold and receive that without feeling so activated, that's what I really want to sort of help you guys with today.

So, I really wanted to start with my own history of defensiveness so that you know that I really feel for this. And I think ironically its one of the hardest traits to recognize in ourselves because we're defensive. So, anybody who's defensive does not want to be called defensive, doesn't think they're being defensive and I was like that too. So that's what I'm going to give some kind of examples as I go through the podcast of how to notice and think of maybe you might be being defensive.

So, let's kind of define what defensiveness is and what the opposite would be. And I'll talk a little bit about what causes it and how you can learn to kind of process it as it comes up. So, I think defensiveness is really the feeling that you have to defend yourself. I know, that seems obvious but there's something in that. We only defend when we think we're being attacked. That's the only time you have to defend.

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And so, it's the sense that any feedback you may be receiving is a personal attack and that you need to respond to that to defend your goodness, your rightness, your worth, the validity of your perspective or your feelings. And I think that defensiveness can feel like kind of a bunch of different emotions. It can feel like fear, or anger, or shame. And in that way I don't think that defensiveness is necessarily its own actual feeling.

I think it's more like a way of describing what our thoughts, and feelings, and actions look like, kind of that model that we are living in, in a split second. When we get triggered emotionally by some kind of input or feedback that we perceive as being a personal attack. And there's kind of a couple of reasons that this happens. So, on one level learning new information can actually, I learned this from one of my students, Deb, actually trigger a release of chemicals in our brain that can also impact our adrenalin levels and other kind of hormonal system.

So just getting new info or learning new info can be kind of activating for your nervous system, and this is called limbic friction. It's a theory about what happens in our brain when we learn. And then how we, how our nervous systems, how we emotionally react to that sensation basically, the chemical experience of learning something new. For some of us just that in and of itself feels unpleasant. And then on top of that we know from so many episodes of the podcast that human brains do not like to be wrong.

Human brains think that being wrong is destabilizing because it means we may not know what's safe and what's dangerous. We may not know what will help or hurt us. We don't know who are our friends or enemies. Your brain preserves energy by believing it already knows everything it needs to know. So, it's a lot of energy to process new information and make new decisions. And so, our brain is resistant to hearing that we may need to rethink something. This is called cognitive dissonance.

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It's why there are studies showing that for instance sometimes when you give people information contrary to their point of view they actually just double down and believe their original point of view harder. And then I think if we have a very sensitive shame or rejection filter for whatever reason, because we were socialized that way which most of us were if we were socialized as women or as other marginalized identities in this society. If we developed that through our early experiences, our childhood, our family life, if we are just neurobiologically inclined that way.

If we experience a lot of fear around rejection for kind of evolutionary biology reasons, which a lot of us do. So, if you have a sensitive shame or rejection filter which a lot of people do, you may actually experience disagreement. Or someone pointing out something you haven't seen or someone not thinking the way you do, as rejection or as an indication that you're a bad person who's being rejected and being kicked out of connection and kicked out of the tribe.

And that shame and fear can kick up instant defensiveness which is our brain trying to protect us. Because if new information might mean we feel shame then we are instantly motivated to reject it. Now, that's not what happens to everybody. Some people have a response that's much more kind of appeasing. Okay, yes, I agree with you. You giving me this new information, I'm not having to think about it myself. I'm just going to immediately agree with you to try to preserve our connection.

So those people are not experiencing defensiveness. But for some of us that shame or fear actually kicks up this feeling that we're being attacked and we need to defend ourselves. And so, then we want to reject it. And I think that can be especially true if it feels like it's a threat to our self-concept.

If we think of ourselves as a certain kind of person or we think we're supposed to be a certain kind of person to be able to feel okay about

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ourselves. And the new information seems to kind of contradict that then again cognitive dissonance sets in and it can also make us want to defend ourselves against this perspective. And I think defensiveness is most common when we believe that someone is commenting on something about us.

But we can also feel defensive about other things we care about like our family, or friends, or just ideas, or positions, or beliefs we have that we don't like hearing challenged. So, I think you can kind of spot defensiveness in a couple of ways. And again, it's a little trickier spot because what comes up isn't the thought, I feel defensive. What comes up is sort of these other thoughts that are serving that psychological need or that mechanism.

But some signs, some things defensiveness can look like. Wanting to immediately disagree or argue with someone's comment or statement before you have even really thought about it. Feeling resentful about someone's comment or statement. Feeling like you need to convince someone urgently to agree with you that what they said was incorrect. You have to get them to take it back, or apologize, or now be back on your side. Wanting to shut down and disengage, wanting to kind of take your toy from the sandbox and go home.

Fixating on kind of not the content of the message but what you make it mean about the other person. How they delivered it or that they shouldn't have said it, or that there's something wrong with the tone in which they said it, or wasn't their place to say it. Sort of even ignoring the content and just getting kind of fixated on being mad at the way they did it or that they did it at all kind of the delivery.

So, I think those are some ways to know when you're feeling defensive. And at the end when I talk about how to allow defensiveness as it's happening, I'll talk a little bit more about the physical signs. But those are

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some of the kind of psychological, or a kind of indicia of defensiveness. And so, if we're trying to figure out how to not be defensive or how to be more skillful with hearing things without getting defensive then we need to know what we're trying to do instead because just trying to not do something is not really helpful. We don't know how to not do something.

And so, you could say the opposite of defensiveness would just be neutrality or something. But I actually think the opposite is receptiveness. So, receptiveness means being actually interested in people's feedback or thoughts. Being receptive to what is being said, not assuming bad motivation, not assuming bad intent, not assuming it's automatically wrong, not taking it personally, not making it mean something about you, just actual curiosity. You could probably also say curiosity is the opposite of defensiveness.

But I think receptiveness is such a beautiful term for what it means to be the opposite of defensive. Receptive means that you actually want to hear people's feedback and thoughts. And you are genuinely curious and open to them. Receptivity does not mean that you have to agree with the other person even if they really think you should. I think one reason we get so tied in knots with defensiveness is that we think that in order to be allowed to keep our own opinion we have to aggressively fight off the other person or even make them agree with us.

And especially with kind of hot topic areas, I think if you have a sensitivity about something in a personal relationship, if you have a sensitivity about yourself, how you do your job. And then you get feedback at your job. Or if it's around something that feels socially very sensitive like internalized bias, or privilege, or whatever, anything emotionally close to us.

We think that if we even allow in the other person's opinion, if we are receptive, that means we have to shame ourselves for having had our original opinion and agree with them. And we don't want to do that so we

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feel defensive and resistant and then their input feels like an attack. And I think defensiveness is so common with perfectionism because if you are a perfectionist you feel deep shame about not being perfect. Getting something wrong, or missing something, or being blind to something feels deeply shameful.

When you've conditioned your self-worth on being good and perfect any suggestion that you're not is really, really painful. And that can be hard to spot because often we know that we're self-critical. And we associate the inability to hear contradiction with arrogance. And we think, well, I'm not arrogant so I don't have a problem hearing feedback. But actually, low self-esteem can also manifest as an inability to tolerate and hear contrary feedback, or a critique, or a contradiction because the shame response is so strong.

Because we think it's so shameful to be wrong or to have missed something because our self-worth is so conditional on being right and proving our goodness to others. And if you're socialized to doubt yourself, to doubt your own brilliance, to see other people as the authority, which women are, it feels even more high stakes to be challenged because you're already so self-critical and self-shaming.

If you are challenged in a way that touches on a painful belief you already have about yourself then your brain kicks in with this protective mechanism of making you feel defensive and try to reject that painful thought someone else is sort of offering you. But being receptive and curious about someone else's point of view does not mean that you always have to agree with it. Other people have full human autonomy to think what they want and to share those thoughts with you when they choose to.

And you have full human autonomy to decide when to listen, and whether to listen, and what to decide to believe. And if you listen, consider and consciously and thoughtfully decide you don't agree with a piece of

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feedback that's not being defensive. There is literally not a topic under the sun that all humans have always agreed on or always agree on now. My partner was horrified last night that I didn't like bratwurst. And people really disagree on what constitutes a just and good society.

There's nothing so small or so large that humans cannot disagree with it and then create committees about their disagreement. Humans have been disagreeing about everything from the beginning of time so it's okay to disagree. But there is no strength in being unable or unwilling to hear other points of view. So, if you know that you're defensive, or this is ringing a little bit of a bell, or you feel defensive about this episode, I want to give you some ideas for how you can start to work on this.

The first is just to notice the physical feeling in your body that you get when someone offers you a thought, or a perspective, or an opinion, or a critique that you don't like. And defensiveness can be tricky because the mind immediately jumps in with a whole story about why you're feeling that sensation, that you're being attacked, that someone's being unfair, that someone's being critical, whatever it is. So, you have to pause and notice that you feel activated. Something is happening in your body.

And you have to get to know your own signs. And so, for me here are some of my signs. You may have different ones. I know that defensiveness is getting activated if I feel emotional activation and shame rising in my body. If I feel a hot flash happening. If I feel an urgent need to respond to a comment or a critique. If I feel an urgent need to fix or change something to get out of a comment or critique to prove that it's untrue or unfair or to fix it.

If I feel an urge to respond spitefully to the person, especially to point out something they've done wrong, or some way that they are not perfect. That's such a sign that I am taking this feedback and I am using it to say to myself, you're not perfect, now you're bad. So, then my initial self kind of protective response is then to want to point out that the other person's not

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perfect either. But of course, nobody suggested anyone should be perfect other than me and my brain.

So, when you notice, whatever your signs are, the first thing is to take a breath and notice it. Try to allow that feeling without acting on it. And you may even want to tell the other person and tell yourself that you feel a lot of emotion coming up and you need a minute to regulate yourself before responding.

And one thing I've seen happen especially when this stuff comes up around privilege, or bias, or blind spots, or social justice stuff, or whatever. Is that people are afraid to just say that because they think that if they do that then they are centering themselves in their feelings and they're going to get in even more trouble. I do not believe that processing your own emotion and expressing it is centering yourself. First of all, what does centering yourself mean? That is obviously a subjective optional thought, it is not a circumstance.

If we believe that it does mean something it actually means sort of making everything all about you, not being able to hear a critique, not being able to hear an input. But instead making the whole situation about your feelings about it. And ironically saying, hey, I'm having feelings come up and I need a minute to regulate myself so that I can respond thoughtfully, that's actually much less making it all about your feelings. Then if you don't regulate yourself, don't ask for that time, respond from unmanaged mind and unregulated emotion.

If you respond from that urgency and activation you are way more likely to derail something to make it all about you, to be unable to hear the feedback, to act out. That's much more likely. So, you're a human. Processing your own emotion and just expressing that you need to do that before you can thoughtfully respond. I don't believe that's centering

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yourself but if it is then it's necessary and unavoidable because we're humans. We're not feedback integration machines.

And we are not always capable of hearing something and immediately being in a clear calm place to respond to it. And it's my belief that owning that, and taking responsibility for that is a much more respectful way to respond to someone, taking the time to offer you their thoughts, than shoving that down, trying to do it perfectly then overreacting instead.

So, take a breath, notice the sensation. If you need to just say you need a minute. Sometimes you're on your own, it's not necessary. And then try to ride that swell of emotion. Try to surf that wave and let it be there and get curious. Why do you feel defensive? What are you thinking? What is your urge to act or to react about, what does your brain want you to do? And what can you learn from that response? Try to get in touch with your thoughts. What are you thinking? How is it making you feel? You can ask yourself, what feels threatening about this?

Let's say I am feeling defensive, why do I feel defensive? What am I afraid that I would feel if this person's feedback or their comments were true? If that was true what would I be thinking and feeling about myself? Your brain will often want to make it about the other person. Don't let it distract you like that. Don't let it be about the other person because it never is. Whether you decide to reject their feedback wholeheartedly afterwards or not, your emotional reaction's not about them. It's about you and your mind, and what you're making it mean for you.

So, you can ask yourself, what am I feeling? And why am I feeling that? What is going on? These are kind of techniques that can help in the moment when you're activated.

But the last thing I want to share with you is that long term, defensiveness is resolved through self-acceptance, and self-compassion, and self-

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forgiveness. These techniques when you're activated in the moment can for sure be helpful. But the whole reason you're defensive in the first place is because of perfectionistic self-critical thinking and an unwillingness to feel and process shame, or feel and process fear. So, to heal it long term that's what you need to work on. It's the self-acceptance, self-compassion, self-forgiveness.

When you have those in place then hearing feedback, and if you decide you agree with it, all that means is you made a mistake. Again, optional thought but you can choose to think that. And so, what do you do when you've made a mistake? You just try to make it better. I left this perspective out of my podcast, good point, let me address it. There's no drama there because I don't make that mean that I'm a bad person, or I shouldn't have my job, or I don't have any business being a coach, or I shouldn't have this platform.

Or, nor do I make it mean those people shouldn't give me that feedback. And why are they picking on me, and whatever, I don't know whatever nonsense you would think. All of that is because I have the relationship with myself where I don't make my own self-acceptance dependent on getting everything right and everybody loving me all the time.

So, when I hear that somebody either doesn't like me, or doesn't love me, or is upset with me, or that wasn't happening in my situation in this case, but for sure has happened in the past, or likes me just fine but has some thoughts about how I could do better. Because my self-worth is not conditional on everyone else's approval and on believing that I've never made a mistake in my life. Then I can hear that and I can reflect, and decide what to do and none of this emotional drama is there.

So, the good news is that it is possible to change defensiveness and I am living proof. But fundamentally it comes down to your relationship with yourself and it is really a portal into working on that.

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Alright my chickens, go solicit some feedback, practice what I taught you today. I'll talk to you 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 Unf*ck Your Brain. It's where you can get individual help applying the concepts to your own life.

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