

UFYB 241: Four Questions for A Yearly Review: Birthdays, Anniversaries, Remembrances



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With Your Host

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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.

Hello my chickens. So I am recording this podcast the day before my 41st birthday. And my birthday also comes exactly a month after my anniversary in my relationship. And so I wanted to talk a little bit about how to use thought work to kind of commemorate anniversaries or how to use it to mark the passage of time. I think that one of the reasons that religion provides such grounding and structure for people apart regardless of what you believe about God or deities or anything else, is that it provides ritual and structure.

I think that we have a pretty deep desire to kind of mark the passage of time, to create meaning and narrative out of our lives and ritual is one of the ways that we help do that. We celebrate the same thing year after year and it gives us a touchpoint through our lives and through the seasons. It gives us a way to measure time, to think about our experience, to categorize it. And so I really like to use anniversaries or – well, they're always called an anniversary I guess.

But a birthday, an anniversary, or relationship, or of the end of a relationship or of someone passing away, or of starting your business, or kind of whatever else. To use those anniversaries as a way to create an opportunity for ritual and reflection. And you can always use the preset opportunities. I always think during the Jewish New Year holidays that I think one of the reasons it feels a little less meaningful to me is that so much of the liturgy is setting aside this time for people to reflect on what they did the year before, what's coming in the next year.

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In the Jewish tradition between Rosh Hashanah which is the new year, and Yom Kippur which is the Day of Atonement. You have this period during which you are supposed to make amends to other people for any ways you've harmed them and to God. And so I always sort of think, well, I think that maybe I spend a lot of my time thinking about what am I doing and who am I being, and who do I want to become. But a lot of people don't and so religious ritual can provide that structure for people. But you can also create your own structure for that.

I happen to have a lot of kind of anniversaries that happen in spring, I have my birthday. I have the anniversary date of going full-time into my business, is just about two weeks before my birthday. I have my relationship anniversary. So it all takes place in a month long period. And so I want to talk a little bit about the structure that I like to use in evaluating any area of my life.

So for instance, and I'm going to talk a little bit about how you can do it yourself or how you can do it with someone else, whether that's a business partner or just get together with a friend and do it and about your own individual lives. Or you can do it with your partner about the relationship. And so I just did this exercise with my partner on our one year anniversary. We went away upstate and had a little retreat day to do this, but I'm also going to do it tomorrow for myself, for my own life and my birthday. And I plan to do it for my business as well.

So here are the kind of four questions I asked myself. And if you've ever done – some of you will have heard these in corporate exercises, which is kind of funny. But you'd be amazed, they work for a reason, how well they work for personal use too. So the first question is what were my favorite moments or themes of the past year? So when I did this with my partner we both wrote down our answers separately to each question and then we

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talked about them. And so we did what our favorite kind of things about the relationship and what were our favorite memories from the year.

If you're doing this on your own you can do it as kind of what were my favorite moments or what were my favorite themes of the year. Or what kind of growth happened this year. What were my favorite elements or aspects of the year, however you want to think about that. So I think it's really useful to start with something positive where you're sort of thinking back over the past year and not just letting it all kind of recede into the background.

Our brains by default generally really want to think about the future and make plans, at least if we're the kind of person who likes to do this kind of exercise. And so I think it's a good idea to on purpose look at the past, think about the past year, cultivate some appreciation and enjoyment by pulling out what you enjoyed. And it's an interesting opportunity when you compare this if you do it with a partner to see, did we enjoy the same things? Are the elements of our relationship that we like the same? Are they different?

There's not a right or wrong to that, it's fine if they're the same, it's fine if they're different. But you learn something about both your own priorities and what matters to you and also your partner's priorities and what matter to them. And you learn kind of about what did they like? What do they like to spend their time doing? What are the times that they feel really close to you? What stands out to them? What stands out to you? Can be really helpful and it kind of primes you for the next couple of questions.

The second question you want to ask yourself is what do you like that you're already doing? So this is sort of like the corporate version is start, stop, continue. And I kind of mix these up a little bit so we start with retrospective, what were your favorite elements or moments of the past

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year? And then I like to go to what do you like doing and want to continue doing? And so this might be in your personal life, this could be in the relationship, this can be activities, it can be attitudes towards yourself or someone else.

It can be ways of relating. It can be things you do in your business, depending on where you're doing this from. When I did this with my partner we focused on both activities that we do together and also interrelationship things, ways we have of communicating, or processing, or resolving conflict or whatever. So kind of inter-relational dynamics, but also just activities. We like hosting dinner parties and want to continue doing that. Whatever it is. So it can be both kind of emotional, qualitative and then also more external and activity oriented.

It's important for this for it to be things you're already doing that you just want to keep doing. This is not the question in which we make any changes. This is a question in which we highlight what we already like that we're doing. Again our brain is always looking for the problem, what we want to change. If I just had more of this or less of this, that's how our brain tends to kind of think if it's left to its own devices.

So you really want to spend some time identifying everything that is already working well, everything you already like that you're doing that you don't want to do more or less of. You just want to keep on doing. It helps kind of show your brain things have been good this past year in these ways even if you've had a hard year. It doesn't matter. There is always stuff that was good and that is still continuing to be good. You just have to learn to look for it.

So that's question two is, what do I want to continue doing pretty much the way I've been doing it? Whether that's your business activities and your programs, or that's your personal life, or that's with a partner, what have we

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done together? What do we continue doing together? Kind of what do we want to keep as is?

Then we go to what we want to stop or have less of. So I like to have the order be that we end on something positive especially if you're doing this in a relationship, I think it's helpful to end on kind of a more positive connected note. So I make the third question, what do we want to stop or have less of? And it's interesting, when I did this exercise, when I went through I saw that so many things that I wanted were really things I wanted more of which we'll get to last. So there were actually very few things that I wanted to stop doing or for us to stop doing.

It was almost all I could see in a way of positive, wanting more of a certain connection, or activity, or emotion, or whatever it was. And it was funny, I think we were both kind of nervous about exchanging our answers to what we want less of because we both have self-critical human brains. And so we both thought that the other person was going to have this laundry list of what we did wrong. And then of course what happened was that we both had things for ourselves that we wanted to do less of.

We both actually were thinking about our own behavior, how we show up in the relationship and what we kind of wanted to do better at, do less of. Do less of in the way of less of whatever behavior or thought pattern we felt was not helpful in the context of the relationship, that we wanted to show up differently for each other. Now, this could also, again, it can be activities. It might be I want to stop being so critical, or I want to stop forgetting to reply to emails or whatever else.

But it can also be I want to stop going to that couples book club where we don't like the other people and we never read the book. It can be an activity also. And again this could be just for yourself, I want to stop going on first dates I'm not excited about. I want to stop pretending that I'm ever going to

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use that Peloton and just put a lounge chair there instead. Or in your business, I want to stop delivering this program. I really am not excited about it anymore and I don't enjoy it. Or I want to stop doing my own bookkeeping, whatever it is.

And again some of these things can be rephrased as things you want to start. But honestly for women especially, people who have been socialized for whatever reason to try to do all the things themselves, and say yes all the time, and people please, I actually think it's very powerful to be like, here's the things I want to stop doing. I just don't like doing these things. I don't have to have a big explanation. I don't have to justify it. I don't have to validate it. I just don't want to go to that book club or whatever it is. I just want to stop doing that thing.

So that's the third question. What do you want to stop doing? What do you want less of in the next year?

And then the fourth one is, what do you want to add? What do you want more of? So this can either be something you're already doing or experiencing, or creating, but you want even more of it, meaning obviously as you're going forward in time you're sort of, if you do it at all, you're adding to what you've already done. So that's kind of more. What I mean really is more compared to the baseline.

So if it was going to roller derby once a week, the year before, if you just want to keep doing that, that you would have answered that in question two about what you want to continue. In question four it would come up if you wanted to go to roller derby twice a week now, or if you had never gone to roller derby and you want to add it. So it's what do we want more of, what do we want to add? This is also such a good opportunity to get to know what parts of you are feeling underutilized, or underexplored, or under-stimulated.

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If you are doing it in your business it can help you open up where do you want your business to go? What is your vision for your business? If you are doing it in a relationship, really you learn a lot about what your partner wants more of, what you want more of. It's a great opportunity to see where you want your partner to do things so you can have a feeling. I made my list first then I was like, "80% of these are things where I want you to follow my manual so I can have a feeling. So let me take responsibility for those and then let me see what's left."

It's a good way to learn kind of what you and your partner, what you want to positively create in your relationship or if you're doing it with yourself, what kind of life you want to create for yourself. So this should feel very fun and generative, what you want more of. If this part feels bad, it's because your wanting of more is coming from scarcity and it's coming from, well, I just need more friends because I don't feel good about myself and I don't believe that I can make good friends and so I need more friends to prove to myself that I can. That's not going to feel good.

So if this part feels bad, if it feels anxious, or desperate, or grippy, or sad, this is an invitation to coach yourself, to really look at yourself and why do you want more of this thing. Always be curious, why do I want less of this, why do I want to keep doing it, why do I want more of it. But when you're really tapped into just things that would light you up and feel exciting and fun and bring you closer to the vision of the life you want to have, that's how this question should feel.

So it's what did we love about, or did I love about the past year, favorite themes, favorite moments, favorite memories? What do I want to continue doing or what do we want to continue doing? What do I or we want to do less of or stop doing? And what do I or we want to do more of or add? And you'll be surprised, it's only four questions but this took us several hours for each of us to write all of our answers, take notes and then talk through

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them. And here's how I recommend you do it. This is how we did it, if you're doing it with someone else.

Answer all the questions and then discuss them all and take notes. And try not to interrupt each other or certainly not argue with each other, let each person talk through their list and then stuff comes up that you can process together, if you're doing it in a relationship or the business partner or whatever. And it's a good idea to keep a running list of that, this came up, we should talk about this more, let's talk about that at our next meeting or our next therapy appointment, or whatever.

But as much as you can sort of let there be space for each person to share their answer to each question and then you share yours and then you can discuss them. But I do recommend do all the questions at once on your own then come together, and then one person answers the first one, then the other person answers the first one, you discuss, you each answer the second one to each other and discuss. I think it's better to do all the answers at once. You can always add things as you go along.

But if anything kind of challenging is going to come up in the conversation, it's nice to have done all of the answering and the writing already. So if the conversation gets derailed or you need to process something or whatever, you have all those answers, you can come back to them later as opposed to you each answer the first question, you start talking about it, it turns into a whole thing and then you never get to the rest of them. So I really recommend, take some time apart or sitting together but quietly answer all four questions.

Then start the process of going through, comparing answers, talking about them and really try to practice letting your partner if you're doing it with someone else, have that space. And if you're doing it yourself, letting yourself have that space, either way not immediately making a desire for

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less of one thing or more of another thing mean something bad about you, whether it's your own desire or it's your partner's desire. Letting there be kind of curiosity and space, and a sense of kind of abundance and excitement about creating the next year together on purpose.

So that is how I recommend you do an anniversary review of any kind, anniversary of your birth, your life, anniversary of a business, anniversary of a relationship, whatever you want to review, those four questions will give you an amazing entry point into reflecting on the past and creating an amazing year. I'll talk to you next week.

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