

UFYB 245: Subconscious Blocks + Both Sides of Beliefs



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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.

Hello my chickens. So, today's podcast episode is a little bit meta and here's what I mean by that. We're going to be talking about thinking about our thoughts. This is actually a huge, huge issue in thought work. And one of the things that happens sometimes is that we actually don't even realize that our thinking about our thoughts matters. So be doing thought work on our thoughts and then we will have the idea that any of our thoughts about that process are somehow just true. So, we'll have a thought that we shouldn't be having these thoughts and we'll just think that that's true.

Or we'll have a thought that our thought is unhelp and bad, and that we need to get rid of it. And we'll think that thought is just true. So, we'll be like, my thought about my kids isn't necessarily true. But the thought I have about myself for having that thought about my kids is true. So, our relationship to our thoughts actually can be more important than the thoughts themselves.

If the only thing that you ever did was just stop judging your thoughts, if you just changed the thoughts about the thoughts, if you just were able to look at your baseline thoughts without judging them, that would change your life all by itself even without changing any of them. So, this kind of meta level, the meta thought, the thoughts about the thoughts are actually super important, sometimes more important than the thoughts themselves. And when we believe that a thought that we're having is negative, or unhelpful, or giving us a bad result, or we want to change it. We're judging it and resisting it.

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Now, I do teach you how to evaluate what results you're getting from your thoughts, especially if you're in The Clutch and you go through the whole program and the whole model that I teach. So, I do teach you to evaluate that. But that doesn't have to come from a place of judging and shaming yourself, and trying to tell yourself that you have to change all your thoughts as soon as possible or you're not doing thought work right.

And what I'm really teaching you is thought neutrality, or you practice observing your thoughts and your results without judging them, or without resisting them, without attaching to them, without having a lot of drama about them. So, I teach you how to learn to observe. But there's also kind of a more active technique that I want to teach you today and that is to look at both sides of every belief. So, sort of like the both sides technique and here's what I mean by that.

When we have a thought that is producing a result for us, if we don't like the result, if we're judging the result and we want to change the thought, we just sort of label that thought as bad. It's bad, it's unhelpful, it's negative, it's giving me a result I don't like. And we cut off our curiosity about the thought. But I think that most of the time when you have a belief, even if you don't like the result, it's doing some kind of work for you. You are getting something out of that thought pattern or that belief.

That doesn't mean that you've done something wrong, or you should blame yourself for having it. It's just that if we think that every belief we have is serving a purpose for us in some way we actually can get much more curious about it. I think that each of our beliefs is sort of holding up one of the beams in the architecture of our belief system. So, we may think that we don't like it and that we want to change it. But then we can't become aware of what work it's doing for us. Our brains came up with these thoughts for some reason, or at least that's not always true.

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Sometimes your brain just spits out a thought for no good reason. But belief systems that are deep, things that we've thought a lot, things that it takes a while to change, I think we've kept those beliefs because they were doing some work for us. This is especially useful or true if you've identified a belief or a thought and you see that it's not getting you what you want and you want to change it. And you keep trying to change it and it keeps not changing. And you keep finding you're doing the same thought work over and over again.

That's a perfect point at which to sort of pause and think, okay, maybe this thought or belief is doing something for me and so I subconsciously don't want to get rid of it. Maybe it is serving some function for me that I don't understand. And that's why my brain is so resistant to letting it go. So, I want to give you a couple of examples.

So, for instance, somebody might be having kind of a bad outcome in their dating, they're trying to find a partner, their relationships aren't getting off the ground, they don't find people to go on dates with or they have dates but they don't have a second date or whatever. And their thought is I'm not good enough to find a partner. And what they see on the surface is that that thought seems really unhelpful. It feels like shit. It's showing up in all these ways that make them insecure, and defensive, and getting in the way of them finding a partner. But it's not shifting.

And so, what they may not realize is that that belief is actually also helping them in some way because it's keeping them safe from feeling vulnerable and then rejected. When you reject yourself ahead of time you protect yourself from feeling vulnerable and open, and feeling rejected by someone else, or you think you do. In reality of course you feel rejected by other people too anyway. But it's sort of like coming into a room and if you're worried that your dress doesn't look nice, saying to everybody there right away, "Hey, just so you know, I know this dress doesn't look good."

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It's like you're trying to preempt the rejection by rejecting yourself. And it keeps you safe from having to be vulnerable and be seen. When you don't like yourself you don't really want other people to see you fully because you have negative thoughts about yourself. So, you think that what they're going to see is bad. So, this thought, I'm not good enough to find a partner, that seems like just an unhelpful, negative thought that you would want to get rid of is actually doing a lot of work to help keep you safe from vulnerability and rejection.

Let me give you another example from kind of business coaching that I was doing recently. When somebody has the thought, I don't know if I'll get clients. I don't know if I'll be able to fill my program. I don't know if people will want this offer. First of all, people just think that's a circumstance that they don't know. And then when I coach them, to see that it's a thought, that it's a belief, I don't know, as if this thing's just going to happen to them.

They can start to see that not only are they just partly mistaken in thinking that that's just a circumstance, it happens to them, as opposed to a result that they can create for themselves. But that thought's actually doing something for them. When we make the result of something seem like a circumstance that's just going to happen to us or not, am I going to find a fir tree in this forest? I don't know. I have to go look in the forest.

Are people going to sign up for my program? I don't know. I have to go see if they do, as if it's a sort of truth that you just have to discover whether it's happening or not. When we think about it that way it actually is protective for us because even though we feel kind of anxious and powerless about it, so you'd think that we would want to change that thought. When we think, I don't know if I can fill the program, I don't know if I can get clients, it doesn't feel good. We think that we want to be confident and think, I know I can.

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But actually, that belief is doing some work for us because it's keeping us from having to believe that we tried and failed and then shaming ourselves. When we believe that whether or not people will want our offer is just a thing that happens to us that we don't control, it does create anxiety to think about it that way. But it protects us from taking responsibility for the outcome because we think that if we took responsibility and we said, "I'm the person who determines if people want my offer." And then we don't get the result we want we're going to shame and blame ourselves.

So that anxiety is actually protective. So much of this is about protecting ourselves from failure or rejection. So, there's a lot of different ways that those kinds of thoughts can be serving us. But here's some big themes that I see that you can look out for. But these are not the only themes, look at your own thoughts, be creative. I'm sure there are other ones that I'm not seeing. But here are four big themes I see. Believing you can't do something feels like shit but protects you from having to try and fail. So, we would rather believe we can't do it so that we won't have to try and fail.

So that belief that we can't do it is doing something for us. We think it's protective. It's keeping us from trying and failing, and then feeling really bad. We'd rather think we can't do it and know that we didn't really try than actually try and fail because of how mean we'll be to ourselves if we fail. Obviously the solution to that is deciding that you're not going to be mean to yourself when you fail, deciding ahead of time what to think if you do fail.

Another one I see a lot is believing you aren't good enough so that you don't have to risk rejection. And these are kind of the same in some way because when we believe we can't do something, we are trying to protect ourselves from self-rejection. When we believe we aren't good enough we are trying to protect ourselves from other people's rejection or self-rejection. Those are really the same thing. If other people reject us but we

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don't reject ourselves then we don't care. But it can happen a little bit differently.

There's believing you can't do something, so you don't have to try and fail, so you don't reject yourself when you fail. And then there's believing you aren't good enough for something so that you don't have to risk rejection from other people. And those can totally overlap. These are fungible categories. I'm just trying to give you some examples. So, I'm not good enough to find a partner, I am not good enough to make partner at the law firm, I'm not good enough to be chosen to star in the show, whatever it is.

So, believing you aren't good enough ahead of time so that you don't put yourself out there and you don't risk hearing no, hearing rejection. A third one I see is one of the ones I just talked about is believing something just happens to you or is outside your control so that you don't have to shame yourself if you try and don't succeed. You're noticing a pattern. So much of these are thoughts that protect us by keeping us from trying to do something or become someone.

And a fourth one I see a lot is blaming other people so that we don't have to take responsibility. Because when we take responsibility we equate that with judging and blaming ourselves. Most of us don't know how to take responsibility for something as in saying, well, I see how I contributed to that, or I caused that, or I see how my actions led to that. We don't want to do that because we don't know how to do that without judging the shit out of ourselves and being mean to ourselves. So, we blame other people.

It feels bad, it doesn't feel good often. Sometimes it feels good to feel righteously indignant. But often people know that they feel like, you know, that thinking of themselves as a victim to someone else and blaming that other person makes them feel really disempowered. So, they don't like that feeling. But it's actually doing some work for them. It's protecting them.

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They'd rather feel that than judge and shame themselves which feels so much worse. And they think those are the only two options.

So, you can see as the throughline here is that almost always when we have some kind of thought pattern that seems unhelpful and negative on the surface but we look beneath that and what it might be doing for us, we're often trying to keep ourself safe in some way. We are trying to protect ourselves from failure. And we want to protect ourselves from failure because we're trying to protect ourselves from rejection by ourselves or other people, but always really comes back to rejection by ourselves.

I've been rejected by many people who didn't want to join The Clutch or sign up with me for one-to-one back in the day or whatever else. That doesn't bother me because I don't reject myself for it. So, it's really about that self-rejection. This is not always what's going on. Sometimes we have a negative or unhelpful thought pattern because it's just a thought someone taught us that we never even knew we could question. A lot of thought work is just being, oh, that's not a circumstance? I can just choose to think something else?

And that's awesome but if you sort of gain awareness of a thought pattern and it's a repeated one and you have trouble shifting it and it's showing up over and over, or you're really resistant to changing it. That's when you want to ask yourself, what work is this thought doing for me that I'm not seeing? What is the other side of this belief? What kind of positive thing am I getting from it on a subconscious level? And I think you will find that often has to do with trying to avoid feeling shame, avoid feeling rejection, avoiding putting yourself out there, trying to feel safe.

That's usually why we are keeping these beliefs is in some way we associate them with staying safe. And your brain would always rather stay safe than anything else because your brain thinks that we're talking about

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your literal physical safety. It can't really distinguish between your emotional and physical safety. When you think about it this way it helps you see that your brain is actually trying to help you. It's just not helping you in the way that you want it to. It's not helping you in the way that it's going to lead to the biggest, boldest, most fully expressed life for you.

But bringing that self-compassion and self-awareness to it is both going to help you see what the thought's doing for you so you can address it, it's also going to give you practice in having that self-compassion and seeing your brain not as your enemy but as a confused ally that sometimes is not really trying to achieve the same goal you are.

Alright, so that's what I recommend. The next time that you find you can't shift a belief or it comes up again and again, even though intellectually you know that it's sort of just a thought, or whatever else, try looking at both sides of it. See what work it might be doing for you, why you might subconsciously want to hold onto it, how you might be kind of erroneously thinking it's protective and then that will show you what you really need to dismantle to shift it. Have a beautiful week my chickens, I'll talk to you next week.

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