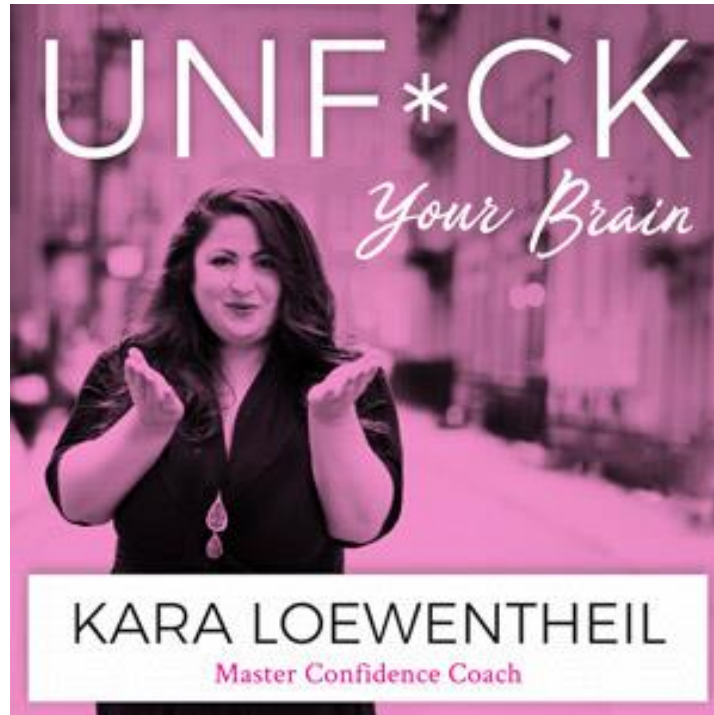


**UFYB 246: Greatest Hits Vol. 12
Radical Self-Love + Self-Care**



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.

Hello my chickens. How are you? I am amazing. I always say that because it's always true. But here's why it's always true. I was just coaching one of my clients about this last week and I was saying to her that our evaluation of our own mental or emotional state is an optional thought. How we choose to categorize, or characterize, or describe our own mental and emotional state, that description is not objective. It's not a circumstance. It's an optional thought.

So, I might have a day filled with negative thoughts and emotions, but during the day and at the end of the day, I can choose whether to call that a bad day, or just an average day, or an awesome day. See what I mean? I get to decide what to think about my own experience and my own thoughts and feelings. It's not just true that a day when you have negative thoughts and feelings is a bad day. That's not objective. That's a decision to describe it that way, that bad means I had negative thoughts and feelings.

What if when you have negative thoughts and feelings, that's an awesome day because you got to learn about yourself or become more resilient? Or just because the way I think about it is any day that I'm alive, I have decided to think is awesome because it's part of the human experience. And I'm all in on the human experience even when it sucks. This is what's so different. This is not spiritual bypassing or pretending life always feels awesome.

No, what I'm saying is sometimes life feels terrible. But I can still choose to believe that I am doing amazing because I am here having a human experience, part of which is supposed to feel terrible. I can decide to

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describe that reality that I'm a human having negative thoughts and feelings as being awesome rather than as being terrible. It's just good to know we have that option. We get to decide.

So, I have been thinking, and coaching, and teaching a lot about our relationships to our bodies. And I've been really going deep in what that means for our relationship to ourselves. How our relationships to our bodies has been making me think about our relationship to ourselves as a whole. So, I've talked about self-love on the podcast before. I mean really, all my episodes are about self-love in some way or the lack of self-love and how that manifests in our thought patterns.

But as I've been developing all of the new curriculum, and teaching, and tools for the Body Image Breakthrough class, I keep coming back to two phrases. Radical self-love and exquisite self-care. I'm going to tell you why, what those mean to me, and what I think they can mean to you.

So, let's start with radical self-love and I'm going to use the old high school debate technique and break out the dictionary to define it. So radical means relating to or affecting the fundamental nature of something, far reaching or thorough. And it also means advocating or based on thorough or complete political or social change. So, I think these are so relate because what is radical self-love? We live in a society where women are taught to put themselves last. We're taught that doing that is what makes us good, what makes us worthy, what makes us valuable.

Men are more often taught that they are valuable in and of themselves. But women are taught they're valuable for what they can do for others. And the more marginalized identities you live in or with, the more ways you're told that you're not good enough. So, if you are Black or Indigenous or a person of color, if you are fat, if you live with a disability or a chronic illness, if

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you're neurodivergent, if you're LGBTQ+, if you're a 'minority' religion, if you're poor, and there's many other aspects.

There are pervasive social ideologies that undermine, and diminish, and negate the value of any human with any of these characteristics. And the more of them you have, the more of those messages you get. And these messages, they don't just exist in a vacuum. They're integral to our social order. Who gets elected to political office? Who gets hired and promoted? Who gets glorified in the media? Usually, people with none or at most one of these identities.

If the person has two, they stand out. Think about, let's say fat white women actresses or singers, there are not that many, a handful. If they have three of these identities, they are usually only one you can name. Think about Lizzo. So, when I think about radical and talk about radical self-love, I mean choosing to love yourself in the face of all of the socialization and conditioning that you have absorbed from a society that is literally built on maintaining those hierarchies and those belief systems. That's why it's a political act.

More women who believe in themselves and love themselves unconditionally, that's more women who will run for office, who will go for the promotion, who will make waves in their chosen arenas. And you may be listening to this and you're not a woman, you don't identify as a woman, same deal. Self-love isn't the only thing we need. We do need structural change as well.

But here's the thing, who do you think is going to make the structural change? Someone has to go out and do that work. Is it going to be people who hate themselves for the ways they're different from the privileged norm? Those are not the people who are able to make change. It's going to be people whose radical self-love will not allow them to settle for accepting

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a world that doesn't recognize their value. Because that is the thing about radical self-love. It's thorough. That's what we learned radical meant. It reaches every area of your life.

And it changes everything. Because one of the most insidious aspects of oppression is that it gets inside your brain. And it makes you believe that number one, you deserve to be treated worse than other people. And/or number two, there's no other option. Nowhere you can go, no job you can have, no one you can be with where you won't be treated that way. And these premises work together.

So, I'm going to shift gears a little bit because I want to give you the example of how this works in personal relationships. I think it's easy to see it there. You will always accept love from other people that matches the love you have for yourself. So, let me say it again. You will always accept love from other people that matches the love you have for yourself. If your love for yourself is conditional, it will seem totally normal and acceptable to you to be with a partner whose love for you is conditional.

If you criticize and mentally abuse yourself, it will seem totally normal and acceptable to you to have a friend who does that too. Now, I want to be really clear. This is not about deserving or victim blaming. You don't control other people's models ever. Their actions are caused by their own thoughts and feelings but this is how the brain works. We seek what is comfortable and familiar. It makes sense to us, upholds our worldview.

If you hate your body, then if your partner says they hate your body, this will not seem odd to you. You're like, "Yeah, agreed, we have this in common, we both hate my body, that makes sense." Whereas if you hate your body and someone says they love your body, you have cognitive dissonance. You don't believe them. You try to dismiss it. If you think you're too much and too loud, and then a friend tells you that you're too much and

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too loud, this won't seem odd to you. You'll be like, "Yeah, that's what I think too, that makes sense."

Now, you may feel hurt and have a defensive reaction, but that's really because you believe it. Your response will be to try to convince the other person that they're wrong or beat yourself up that they're right. But now imagine if you have radical self-love. So how would you react to someone who's inconsistent in their affection or their attention? If you're consistently affectionate and attentive to yourself, you just aren't available for a relationship with someone who isn't.

Why would you be with someone who treats you in a way that you don't treat yourself? It just won't compute in your brain. If you treat yourself with love, and care, and respect, and reverence, when you come across someone who doesn't, it won't feel so comfortable and familiar. It won't make sense; it won't seem normal and you'll stand out. You won't understand why they would think you would want what they're offering you.

If you think, if you've cooked an elaborate, gorgeous meal and somebody comes by and is like, "Hey, I found some old French fries in my car, do you want them?" You're not offended or outraged, but you're just like, "Why would I add that? What is that adding to what I already have here?" You will always accept love that matches the way you love yourself. When you love yourself radically and completely, you're simply not available for any other kind of love.

And if someone comes along who doesn't love you this way, you're just not interested. There's no hustling to prove your worth or get their love because you're not in any doubt about your worthiness. You already have that love from yourself. So, if someone comes along who offers a similar level of love for you, well, that's delightful. And you might be like, "Yeah,

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bring it to the party, that sounds fun.” But if someone was offering less, you’re not interested. And it doesn’t feel like any kind of loss.

I think the same is true in our relationships to society and institutions. We can’t opt out of them quite as easily as we can opt out of a second date, but it’s still a helpful analogy. Because let’s think about it. What is more helpful to the status quo than a marginalized person or community who accepts their marginalization as deserved or unchangeable, who internalizes a sense of their own inferiority and who is willing to subsist on the crumbs that fall from above?

And not all of us are in the same place on this. I would say probably a few people listening to this podcast are all the way at explicitly accepting and agreeing that because they’re a woman, or because they’re a person of color, or because they’re fat, or because they live with a disability, they’re worthless. We don’t have that thought consciously. But we internalize so much of this stuff that we end up hustling for our worth because we have internalized these messages of unworthiness. And as long as we are believing them, we’re complicit in the status quo.

We’re not thinking about changing it. We’re just thinking about getting legitimacy and getting validation. When you’re hustling for your worth in a personal relationship, you don’t think about changing the partner or the friend to a different one because your thought process is I just need them to see I’m good enough. And the same thing happens in our interactions with society, and institutions, and jobs, and everything else.

And on the other hand, what is more dangerous to the status quo than a marginalized person or community who loves themselves radically and completely, who will not countenance a society that does not reflect that love, who has freed themselves from internalized self-hatred and rejection. And who believes completely in their right to exist, and be equal, and be

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loved? That's what is dangerous to inequality. That's when you can't abide a society that doesn't match what you know your worth.

And so, I think this is where the second phrase that I have been coming back to comes in. How do we create that radical self-love, how do we start to practice it and live it? It happens in your thoughts, of course. But the way that I like to access it is to think about what would it be like to take exquisite care of myself?? This is where exquisite self-care comes in. And I actually think that this phrase I may have borrowed from Susan Hyatt, who's a coach, who talks about being a woman who takes exquisite care of herself.

And I think we mean it in some overlapping, but maybe somewhat different ways. When I look up the definition of exquisite, what it means is extremely beautiful and typically, delicate. And when I think about what delicate means in this context, I don't think it means breakable or fragile. I think it means careful, on purpose, treated gently and with reverence. And that does not mean bubble baths and spa days. I mean, those are fine, but that's not what we're talking about. I mean taking care of yourself exquisitely. The way you take care of someone you completely and fully love.

So, think about how you touch yourself. When you get dressed or when you put on face cream, do you rush yourself? Are you rough with yourself? Are you inattentive to yourself? Or do you touch yourself the way a lover would, gently, with tenderness? Think about how you feed yourself. Do you eat the leftovers off your kid's plate standing up over the sink? Is that how you'd host dinner for a new loved one, a new partner, a new best friend? Think about how you talk to yourself. Do you say things to yourself you'd never say to someone you love?

This is not about perfection. Even with people we truly love we sometimes are short, we snap, we have perfunctory sex. We're not always fully

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engaged. But your relationship with yourself needs to be at least as thoughtful, and nurturing, and loving as your relationships with other people in your life. And when you are trying to figure out how to love yourself radically, asking yourself if you are taking exquisite care of yourself is such a window in because the answer will either be yes, in which case, amazing, no, I just never thought about it but now I'm going to, or no, and here's why.

Here's all my thoughts, all my reasons that I shouldn't do that and I need to do things this other way. And I'm not worth it, and I don't deserve it, and I'm not good enough and I can't be alone with myself, whatever thoughts are keeping you from taking exquisite care of yourself. Those are the thoughts that are in between you and radical self-love. So, I always teach the thought has to come before the action.

Exquisite self-care is the action, but it flows from radical self-love and it is a way of accessing how to be radically self-loving. And a way of identifying where your thoughts may not be lining up to produce radical self-love and how you can change them. If you create radical self-love in your thoughts and your feelings, and if you take exquisite care of yourself in your actions, you are less likely to accept less than exquisite treatment anywhere else.

So, I want to be really clear when I say this because sometimes when we talk about the role of self-care, or self-talk, self-touch, all of that. It can be misinterpreted to sound like we're saying something like if you do a face mask, patriarchy will fall. That it's sort of privileged and self-indulgent and that it distracts from community solidarity work and focuses on the individual and their own internal experience, and that that is, for those of you who are more political nerds, that that is just a sign of neoliberalism, capitalism's focus on individualism.

If you didn't know what that last three sentences meant, it really doesn't matter. It's not crucial to the point of this podcast, but for those of you who

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that's how you think, I want to speak in that register. And so, you all know if you've been listening to this podcast that that is not where I'm coming from and not what I'm teaching. I have worked as an emergency room counselor for sexual violence survivors. I have escorted at reproductive health clinics. I have been a litigator for reproductive rights. I ran a thinktank, I've done policy work. I was an academic.

I have worked in a variety of different ways on social change. And what I understand as a coach is that people have to carry out the social change. We talk about this like there's some community effort that can happen without individuals participating in it and doing it and the individuals have to do it. And what I also know is that liberation is an inside job when we're talking about the liberation from oppressive ideology.

When we're talking about liberation from oppressive institutions, that is a social collective world changing job, but it again, has to be done by people who have liberated themselves individually. You have to, any social change that has ever happened has happened because somebody had freedom in their mind to look around and say, "You know what, society is telling me this is how it's supposed to be and I'm inferior and I don't fucking accept that. I do not accept that premise." That comes from radical self-love.

So, when I talk about the importance of exquisite self-care, I mean it as a radical subversive act. If you are socialized to believe that your body belongs to other people and only matters for the work that capitalism can get out of you, or the sexual value that men can get out of you, or whatever else. What is more radical than reclaiming your body for yourself? Treating your body with reverence, with care, with love, only for your own benefit because it is the home you live in.

That is a radical, subversive, revolutionary act to love yourself in the face of a society that tells you, you are not worthy of love, or you are only worthy of

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love when you are catering to and upholding the privileges other people have or oppressive systems.

So, make no mistake, exquisite self-care is not the solution to everything, but it is a part of the radical self-love where any change has to start. And the way that I'm talking about it in this podcast, it is a tool. It's both for its own benefit for all the reasons I just said, but it's a diagnostic tool to help you figure out what thoughts you have internalized that you don't know you believe.

So, if you say to yourself I'm going to make myself a nice dinner and sit down and eat it, and then your brain immediately doesn't want to do that because it thinks that's lonely and sad because you don't have a partner. And you should be working instead. And now all of a sudden we can see all these thoughts that are keeping us disconnected from ourselves, not in a place of radical self-love. So, it's both subversive, revolutionary act on its own that gives you the emotional resources and the mental freedom to create change in the world if you want to.

But it's also a really great tool to use to figure out what's keeping you from practicing it. When you set out to decide to practice it or you just think about it. All of a sudden you will begin to see the unconscious thoughts you've internalized from society that are keeping you from practicing exquisite self-care and that are keeping you from radical self-love.

And this is why thought work, and self-coaching, and self-development, whatever you want to call it, is not frivolous, or silly, or optional. It is imperative. It is transformational. And it is radical in all the best ways because any change we want to see outside of us has to start in our own minds. To be a person carrying one or more marginalized identities and to use the power of your own mind to kick out the colonizing forces of social

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conditioning on your brain. That is what will change your life and that is what will change the world. I'll talk to you next week.

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