

## UFYB 254: Conditional Self-Esteem



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## UFYB 254: Conditional Self-Esteem

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.

Listen up coaches, if you are a coach of any kind with any experience certification, non-certification, multiple certifications whatever, if you are a coach, if you are working as a coach, if you are coaching, whether that's one client or 20 clients, and you're listening to this podcast, it is super important that you make sure that you are on my email list that's only for coaches. I have an email list where I keep coaches updated on anything I'm doing that is for coaches and where all of my teaching and information and training and all of that good stuff that's for coaches goes so that this podcast doesn't, you know, just become just for coaches.

So if you are listening and you are a coach and you have ever wanted to, or think you may ever want to learn more about feminist coaching from the coach perspective of how to be a better feminist coach, how to bring intersectional feminist principles into your coaching, how to de-hierarchize, de-hierarchy the coaching relationship, how to create more feminist coaching spaces, how to coach in a way that is more transparent and inclusive and collaborative, all of the feminist coaching principles that I teach you need to be on this specific email list. So here's how to get on it.

Text your email address to +1347 997 1784. Again, that's +1347 997 1784. The code word is just the initials. ACFC. ACFC. So that stands for the Advanced Certification in Feminist Coaching, which is my advanced certification for coaches, where I certify people to practice my feminist coaching principles and framework.

And of course, all of that information also goes to this email list. If you have been waiting for us to open up registration again, we only do it once a year. We're coming up on it. Soon applications will open to that list first and

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applications are done on a rolling basis. So the earlier you apply, the better your chance of getting in.

So if you wanna know when that's happening, anything related to feminist coaching goes to my feminist coach's list. So again, text your email to +1347 997 1784. Use code word, ACFC, all the initials, or go to unfuckyourbrain.com/acfc. Okay. Again, unfuckyourbrain.com/acfc. Make sure you get on that list, cause that is where all the good coach stuff goes. I'll see you there.

Hello my chickens. How are you? I am amazing. I'm enjoying this weird spell of fall weather that we are having in New York in the middle of August which is probably a bad sign but it's still nice to feel a cool breeze. And I just got back, I went to Tennessee with my partner and his family. And I'm going to go upstate in a few days to soak up the last bit of summer which is ironic because I generally hate summer. But I'm going to a house with a screened in porch which for me is if there's a screened in porch and a ceiling fan I can handle summer, then I'm pretty happy.

So, I don't really understand why any house in the world doesn't have a screened in porch but they haven't put me in charge of that and this is not really a podcast about different types of porches, and verandas, and balconies. So, this is exactly a coaching podcast so that's what we're going to talk about. So, I was coaching one of my students the other day and I said this phrase as I was coaching them. And as soon as I said it I was like, "Wait, I need to write that down." Because I knew I had to do a podcast on it.

So, here's the concept and I'm going to explain it. And I'm going to tell you how you can start to notice and respond to it in your own brain. So, you have probably heard a lot of interchangeable terms like positive self-regard for instance which is what it sounds like, seeing yourself in a positive light, having a positive vision of yourself, having positive thoughts about yourself,

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or self, positive good self-esteem. Esteeming yourself, holding yourself in esteem, thinking well about yourself.

We're going to talk in this episode, I'm going to use the term self-esteem but you could use self-like, or self-love, or self-regard, or self-esteem interchangeably. These are all different ways of talking about the same thing. So, when we have kind of positive self-esteem it means that we think positively about ourselves overall. Like I said, we hold ourselves in high esteem. This is something that we all want, whether we know it or not. I mean ironically some of us think that having good self-esteem means being arrogant.

But when you look at what we're doing in our lives, so much of what we're doing is trying to take actions that will let us think positive thoughts about ourselves. So much of our behavior is motivated by wanting to think something positive about ourselves. So sometimes we're trying to do something directly like get an A on a test, or clean the house so that we can say something nice to ourselves. And sometimes we're trying to please other people so that they'll like us so then we think that gives us permission to like ourselves.

So, we try to manipulate what other people think of us and we try to manipulate our own thoughts through our actions. We try to do well at work so our boss will praise us and we can feel good about ourselves. Or we try to go for a run every weekend so we can think that we are a good person who exercises because we think that's a moral issue and we can feel good about ourselves.

And I think the term 'ego' has a bad rap but it's a very natural human desire to want to think well of yourself, to want to have your own self-acceptance and self-validation. Because otherwise it's like you're living with a bully inside your own head and that's very unpleasant. But unfortunately, we aren't really taught how to create that organically. So, we're always trying to

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get it in these round about ways from outside of ourselves. And we know that when we don't have good self-esteem, when we don't have positive self-regard, we end up acting in ways that are detrimental to our overall wellbeing.

When we have a lot of negative thoughts about ourselves and we have a negative view of ourselves we sort of act that out. We don't think that we deserve much from life when we think that way about ourselves. So, we may stay in relationships that don't feel good to us or where we aren't treated well because we don't think we deserve or can find any better. Or we may underearn and underachieve in our careers because we don't believe in our potential, and our talent, and our skills.

Or we may use substances to numb ourselves out because we can't bear to hear our negative thoughts about ourselves and we're so exhausted from constantly beating ourselves up. And we may even get on this kind of hamster wheel of constant self-improvement, that might be what led you to this podcast ironically. Always chasing the high that we imagine we'll finally feel if we can improve ourselves enough to make our brains like us. But none of this works of course and that's because all of what I'm describing comes from confusing unconditional self-esteem and conditional self-esteem.

And again, you could call it self-like, self-acceptance, self-love, self-regard, whatever you want, whatever genre you're kind of – not genre, that's not the right word but whatever term you're using there is a conditional version of it and an unconditional version of it. When you have conditional self-esteem you are willing to accept yourself or think positive things about yourself only if certain conditions are met.

So, I'm going to say that again because this is the key to everything. When you have conditional self-esteem, or conditional self-regard, conditional self-acceptance, you are willing to accept yourself or think positive thoughts

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about yourself only if and when certain conditions are met. Some of these conditions you may be kind of explicitly aware of like I have to see a certain number on the scale in order to be allowed to feel good about myself. I have to maintain a certain GPA. I have to be married and not divorced. I have to have a prestigious job.

I have to make a certain amount of money, whatever it is. I have to not have yelled at my kids today. Some of these conditions we are very explicitly aware of. Some of the conditions can be more opaque to us. They might be subconscious, they might be kind of ambiguous, or vague, or difficult to define. And that's more of the case when you can't quite put your finger on it, you just kind of know that there are years that you feel okay about yourself if your life is going a certain way. And then you kind of feel not okay about yourself if your life doesn't look a certain way.

Or you feel okay about yourself on the days that your brain happens to say you look thin when you look in the mirror but then you feel bad about yourself on the days that your brain says you look fat when you look in the mirror. And obviously for anybody who this is the first episode they're listening to, I don't think fat is a bad thing. But the point is if you have a negative body image you generally think fat is a bad thing. And so, if your brain says that to you, does that ruin your day? And sometimes we're not even sure what causes the changes in our self-esteem or our self-regard.

You can be feeling pretty good one day and then something just triggers a change, you yell at your kid, or you see a college classmate doing really well, posting something on social media about buying a new car or selling their business, or getting engaged, or your partner criticizes you. Whatever it is, you're feeling fine, you might be even feeling good about yourself and then something happens and all of a sudden you feel inadequate, insecure, unworthy.

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If that happens, if any of what I've been describing happens to you, that's how you know that you have conditional self-esteem. Conditional self-esteem, it means that your relationship with yourself is defined by the presence or absence of certain external conditions. It's not defined by a relationship of acceptance and self-compassion that endures regardless of outside circumstance, that is unconditional self-esteem, unconditional self-acceptance, unconditional self-regard.

Conditional self-esteem, conditional self-acceptance, conditional self-regard is when your relationship with yourself varies like the stock market depending on external circumstances. And when I say that I'm including things like yelling at your kids. You might not think of that as an external circumstance because it's an action that you take but the point is that when you have conditional self-esteem, certain conditions have to be met outside of you or in your own behavior, or even just in your own thoughts before you're allowed to accept or like yourself.

You're willing to accept, or like, or love yourself if and only if certain criteria are in place. Whether you know what they are or you don't know what they are, whether they're consistent throughout your life or they change, either way. The foundation of your relationship with yourself is not stable. It shifts under your feet depending on whether or not you are meeting those criteria. This is a very normal thought pattern to have. And in fact, we are taught to have it.

And I think people socialized as women are taught this even more because people who are socialized as women are taught that they don't have inherent value. Nobody says to you, "Hey, we think you're a girl and that means we don't think you have any inherent value." No one says that, or most people don't say that but we are taught through example of all the things that are valuable about us which are how you look.

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Whether other people want to fuck you. Whether you are being nice. Whether you are being kind. Whether you are prioritizing everyone else. Whether you are helping out around the house. Whether people want to date you and marry you. Whether people ever think that you have too many opinions, or too much of a personality. Women are socialized to believe that what makes us lovable are accomplishments, or appearance, or certain virtuous personality traits we're supposed to have.

And women are socialized to believe that the verdict on whether we're valuable comes from the opinions and approval of other people. So, it's no wonder that our self-esteem is conditional. It evolved as we grew up based on all of these messages we've absorbed from society about what makes someone worthy or not worthy. The problem with conditional self-esteem is like the problem with conditional love from someone else. It's not reliable. It doesn't feel safe and you can't depend on it. So, you don't feel safe with yourself.

And that is a state of low level or a high level chronic stress to be putting yourself through. And you end up constantly seeking validation and security outside yourself. Now, there's nothing wrong with interdependence, and creating connection with other people. When I am teaching that you don't want to depend for validation and security outside of yourself, that doesn't mean that you shouldn't care for people or love people, even rely on them on some level. That's how society works.

But we can't control other people. They aren't here to be vending machines for our security and validation. And that's actually objectifying them. So, it's important that your self-relationship, that relationship that you'll have forever is grounded in unconditional self-esteem. Even if somebody loves you so much and wants to meet your every need they will still not always be able to because they are other humans and most of the time people also just change and evolve or don't want to meet your every need and they shouldn't. That's actually not healthy if they do. If their whole goal in life is to be a vending machine for your feelings.



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So, none of this means don't have relationships, don't have intimacy with other people. But your self-esteem if it is conditional on your accomplishments, or your appearance, or what other people think about you, it's always going to feel shaky. When your self-esteem is conditional you can't rely on yourself to support yourself and accept yourself. And so, you'll always feel unsafe. And you won't feel like you can really relax even around yourself.

And what's particularly tricky is that your brain will often move the milestones. So, if your self-regard, or your self-esteem is conditional you might think the conditions are these things. I need to weigh a certain amount, I need to get married by a certain age and I need to have a certain kind of job. And some of us will go and do those things and then we still don't feel good. Your brain does not automatically then just switch over to saying only nice things to you.

If you have trained your brain to sort of tell yourself that self-acceptance is just over the hill of the next accomplishment, or that self-acceptance is only good as long as everybody likes you all the time, that's the only time you can feel it. Then even when you accomplish those things or temporarily it seems like everybody likes you, you won't feel stable, you won't feel secure.

No matter what happened in your childhood or your adulthood, no matter what formative experiences you've had the good news is your relationship with yourself is something you can always start to improve at any point in time. So, I'm going to give you kind of the next steps to start working on this yourself, depends on who you are. So, first of all if you are a coach listening to this, this is why learning how socialization impacts people's brains is so incredibly important. The rest of this episode is not just for coaches. I'm going to talk to you non-coaches in a minute.

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But if you are a coach listening to this I want you to just really understand, I want to really stress for you why this is so important. Because if you are trying to coach people especially if you try to coach people who are socialized as women, if you are not addressing this and don't understand how to address this, and if you don't understand all the ways that socialization has impacted their brains in this conditional self-regard then it's very easy to get sucked into helping your client achieve goals that they are trying to achieve for the wrong reasons.

And we think as a coach our job is to help a client achieve their goals. But if you're not doing this deeper level of analysis about what the goal is, why they picked the goal, what they think the goal, depends on the goal, what are the stakes of the goal for them. And you don't understand the way that conditional self-esteem shows up in every area of people's lives, you're not going to be able to coach as effectively.

And conversely, when you do understand this at a deep level and you learn the tools to coach about this, you are going to be able to create so much deeper transformation for your clients. There's not that much point in helping a coach and client get the promotion, or lose weight, or get engaged, or whatever when the whole reason they're doing it is conditional self-esteem. You're not really solving their problem. So, if you are a coach and you can tell that this is going on with your clients then I want you to make sure that you are on the feminist coaching interest list which is just the part of my email list for coaches.

So, if you are a coach, you want to make sure that you are on that special email list I have. And to get on it you can text your email to +1347 997 1784, that's +1347 997 1784 and then the codeword is ACFC. That's all one word and it's all initials, the letter A, the letter C, the letter F, the letter C. It stands for Advanced Certification in Feminist Coaching, so ACFC, that's the codeword to get on that list. Okay, so that's if you're a coach.

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If you're in the Clutch, you can unlock the self-esteem, self-confidence and self-love course for your next course, use your next course credit to unlock that course. We go into this in great detail there. There's a lot more audio teaching on it and we've got the workbook and the exercises to get you going on it.

If you're not in the Clutch here is where to start. This is the quick and dirty version. So first you've got to figure out what is your self-regard conditional on. Your brain probably has a specific list of things that it bases your self-regard, your self-esteem on. So, get that all out on paper, what are the conditions, the criteria that your brain has for you to like yourself or feel okay about yourself.

Second, you want to start finding some ladder thoughts that you can practice to shift some of them. And so, I have a whole episode about ladder thoughts that you can listen to. But for instance, if you know that your self-esteem is conditioned on going to the gym every day, you can practice a thought like people can be worthy of love or people can be good people even if they don't go to the gym every day. Or you can try the and approach which is like I didn't go to the gym today and I still have value as a human being or, and I still care for myself.

Even though this seems to validate that the gym has something to do with your worthiness, which it doesn't, you're kind of satisfying that part of your brain temporarily while also giving it something more productive to think.

Third, you could practice thoughts about self-esteem like I'm willing to believe I can develop positive self-esteem. So, any of those three are good kind of approaches to take in shifting some of these thoughts.

Fundamentally your self-esteem is shaped by how you think about yourself and over time you can shift your thoughts to develop a positive, and unconditional, and accepting self-esteem. That doesn't mean that you never have negative thoughts about yourself again.

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I unconditionally loved my cat. That doesn't mean that I didn't sometimes a little bit want to murder him because he was screaming. Self-love, unconditional self-esteem is not just fairytales and rainbows with yourself and always feeling like you are the most amazing person in the world and obsessed with yourself. That's not what it's about. It's about having a baseline of acceptance, and love, and care for yourself, that doesn't shift and change.

If my cat was screaming, I was annoyed, I didn't think that meant that he was an unworthy animal who didn't deserve to be fed and taken care of, or that I now no longer loved or cared about him. That's the difference. Just like you feel for a close friend, or a partner, or a pet, underlying unconditional love can be there even when you have negative thoughts on top of it. It's the difference in the orientation that's underneath, that's the goal. Positive self-esteem is not a perfectionist fantasy where you always feel amazing.

I think sometimes especially people who get into self-development they just turn self-esteem, or self-love into the new fantasy thing where if they just learn how to do that perfectly they never have to have negative emotion again, that's not how that works, believe me. You still are going to be a human but it's a stable base of self-acceptance where you see the best in yourself, you give yourself the benefit of the doubt. You don't bully or abuse yourself and you know that you're fundamentally safe with yourself in your own mind.

Right, have a beautiful week my chickens, practice some unconditional self-esteem. I'll talk to you next week.

If you're a coach or thinking about becoming a coach and listening to this podcast has made you realize that you don't want to be coaching inside that white box. That you want your coaching to be able to speak to the huge diversity of identities and lived experiences, and to be deepened and

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enriched by a historical, and cultural, and intellectual perspective so that you are truly coaching at the highest level. And you are truly helping to elevate the coaching industry, and elevate the coaching discourse until it can actually speak to everyone and change the world.

Then the Advanced Certification in Feminist Coaching is what you need. The waitlist for the next round of the Advanced Certification in Feminist Coaching is now open. This is the list that gets the first shot at registering for the certification. The last time that we ran it we filled it entirely from this waitlist. So, if you think you might want to join the program, you need to be on this waitlist. You can text your email to +1347 997 1784. You text your email to that address and then you will get a response asking for a codeword and you just type back ACFC, just the letters all in a row, uppercase, ACFC.

So, text your email to +1347 997 1784 and use the codeword ACFC when you're prompted. Or you can go to [unfuckyourbrain.com/acfc](http://unfuckyourbrain.com/acfc). I'll see you there.