

UFYB 259: What is Thought Work?



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? It has been raining in New York for – I don't know, it feels like seven weeks straight, that's probably not right but I'm a little bit waiting for the Ark to float by. I don't feel like I've seen the sun in several days. So, I have some thoughts and feelings about that but you know what, that's okay. I'm managing my mind. I am getting over being sick and that always makes me feel super appreciative of even my baseline of health which is solid and just that kind of feeling that life energy return is such a kind of beautiful experience, really is that 50/50.

So, I have been thinking about this podcast episode for a while but it took some thinking to just kind of settle on how I wanted to approach it. And to be honest, that's because the idea for it came from me feeling a little annoyed. So, the spark of the idea, the germ of the idea was actually a little bit from an unmanaged mind. But I proceeded to manage my mind about it and I decided that there was something useful in here. So, I'm going to tell you why and I'm actually going to – as both while I'm talking about the substance of the episode.

I'm also going to walk you through my process because this is actually just a great example of doing thought work. So, here's where this started. My social media network is made up of a lot of coaches for obvious reasons. You know this is my professional colleagues, I still also have my former life people from my social media. So, I just kind of actually love that because my social media is just so diverse in terms of people's backgrounds, and politics, and belief systems, and priorities.

It's just everything from radical, anarchist to prosperity, gospel, the secret believers, just really the whole range. It's fascinating. So anyway, lots of

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coaches and various associative similar type work. And in the last few months I feel like there's been a sort of uptake in increasing kind of posts and complaints about why 'thought work' doesn't work for a x, y, z problem, whatever it is. And the posts will say something like, you know, they're describing a problem that a potential client might have.

And then they're saying, "Thought work absolutely won't work on this. You have to process the emotion. You have to deal with this on an emotional level. Don't try to change your thoughts." And every time I read something like that I'm like, "Well, processing emotions is part of thought work. If you are teaching thought work, you're teaching people to process their emotions. And I'll get to kind of whether that's true in a minute.

Or for another example, I'll see a post that talks about how 'thought work' can't solve every problem. You shouldn't thought work yourself into staying in a bad relationship. And I am sort of really like, "Yeah, I think we all agree on that." I don't think anybody's teaching that you should thought work your way into staying in an abusive relationship. So, I've been doing this little conversation in my head every time, and feeling kind of righteously irritated over it which we all know that that feeling can feel good for a minute.

Let's not lie, the reason righteous indignation is so attractive sometimes is that it fucking feels good. We get some kind of neurochemical hit from feeling we are justified in our indignation and the other person's wrong. And that may be more true actually for – I hadn't thought about this before but as I'm talking, I wonder if it's more true for people who are socialized as women or in other moralized identities where they're basically taught they're not allowed to be angry and that their anger is not acceptable and is dangerous and they're taught to sublimate their anger.

So, I wonder if we're even more excited to get to feel righteously indignant because anger is this intoxicating feeling that we don't let ourselves have a lot of the time. So anyway, that's a sidenote. Okay, so I'm doing this, I'm

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reading my social media, I'm having a little righteous indignation in my brain all the time. But then I decide to coach myself. And I decided that being irritated about someone else's social media is not a good way to spend my time. And what is this really about? Well, I don't even have a feeling.

I read posts about everything in the world and I just don't care, and I don't agree with them, and I move on. So why am I kind of glitching on this? And I think that's just an example of a crucial aspect of what I call thought work, even though I have not yet defined thought work on this episode, we're going to get there. But a crucial aspect of my body of work, my teaching over the last how many episodes of this podcast, involves getting curious about your own emotional reactions and triggers. Why is something setting you off?

And never assuming that it's just sort of because the thing is bad. That doesn't mean that you can't after reflection decide that yeah, you think the thing is bad. But it never disserves you to be curious about your own reaction in my belief. So, I asked myself why I was irritated. And then my thought was that people were kind of using thought work or this kind of work as a kind of strawman. They wanted to differentiate themselves as coaches by kind of tearing something else down and that they're being ungenerous. And so, then I looked at that thought and my own thought.

I had no idea if that was true. I had just made that up. And when I looked at it, that was my ungenerous thought. So of course, the way that thoughts work is that when, generally when you think someone else is being a thing towards you, you are often also being that thing. You are sort of projecting and reflecting the way you are thinking. Because when I was thinking this way I was differentiating myself from them in my mind by mentally tearing them down.

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And so, I was mad that people seemed to be trying to tear down a certain kind of approach to coaching. But then when I looked at my model in my own mind it was like, oh, well, I'm just trying to tear them down. Your thoughts are always mirroring. So, I was like, "Okay, what else could be going on here? That's my thought about ungenerous or tearing down." And what I realized is that I think that many people and even some coaches may not actually understand what thought work really is and what it entails.

And if that's the case that's not they're fault. It may be that those of us who teach it and are leaders in the field have not adequately explained what it really means and that's on us. And I do think that the term, thought work is a little misleading because it's kind of natural to assume that thought work means just working with your thoughts. And if you were going to take it to this very literal place and be kind of reductive about it, you might say, "It literally just means trying to thought swap."

That's it, just not doing anything with your emotions, not paying any attention to your nervous system, values, social conditioning, none of any of that, just pure somehow cognitive force with no other considerations. You see a thought, you change the thought by force if necessary, that's it. So, I think as a field, as an industry we maybe have not done the best job naming this. And that's okay, it's not on me personally to solve for the whole field. But it is on me to really explain what I mean when I talk about thought work. What I mean by that shorthand.

And I could call it just coaching, but to me the term thought work is much more capacious than it just being about your thoughts. Because you're not a brain in a jar. And in my work and the way that I teach it, you actually cannot effectively change your thinking without paying a great deal of attention to your body, to your somatic experience, to your emotions and your nervous system. When I talk about thought work I'm not talking about a set of tools that privilege the mind over the body.

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I'm actually talking about a set of tools that integrate the mind and the body. There's a reason that when you join The Clutch, the very first thing you learn is how to process your emotions, how to identify your feelings, how to actually move through them and let them fade and let them flow. That's the first thing you learn. So why would I start a thought work program with emotions? Because your emotions are the key to the whole endeavor, to everything we're doing.

Your body is the barometer that we use to understand how your thoughts are impacting you, how your nervous system is reacting to things. Your body is a crucial piece of the puzzle and it's not one way communication. Your body tells you how your thoughts are working, what your thoughts are creating in your body. And your body is information that it shares with your brain. And then you have more thoughts about the bodily sensations that you're having. So, you can have a thought, it causes a physical sensation and then you have thoughts about that sensation.

Or you can have a nervous system response which is in my book, it might not be driven by an explicit conscious thought, but a nervous system reaction is mediated through the brain. So, the reason that we have a nervous system reaction is that the brain is remembering something that has happened before and is predicting that it's going to happen again or is thinking it is happening again. That's mediated through your brain. Sometimes I feel when people talk about the nervous system they think that it exists without the brain.

Your brain, it's part of it, your nerves go to your brain, they go to your spinal cord. Your spinal cord goes to your brain. So, it's all related. And when we think about it as just this bifurcated system, we're really missing the point. Thought work, the way that I teach it is very much about integrating that mind and body experience. It is not about ignoring your emotions, your nervous system, your trauma history, whatever it is.

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All those things impact both how your brain perceives reality and interprets it, and how that manifests in your body through your emotions, through your nervous system, through the chemical releases that your brain makes when it thinks a thought, or thinks that it's experiencing something all over again or whatever is happening. It's a really complex multilayered system.

So thought work is not ignore your feelings, change your thoughts. And it's not there are no real challenges in the world, it's all just thoughts. Neither of those are accurate kind of explanations of what thought work is, at least the way that I teach it. So, the way that I teach it, thought work is the practice of becoming aware of how you're thinking is impacting your emotions, your actions and what you create in your life. And when I talk about emotions I'm sort of including your nervous system in that.

Remember, these are all words that humans have made up to describe different experiences that we have in our bodies and different theories about what is going on with those bodily experiences. What is taken as gospel today was not what people believed 200 years ago, and it won't be what people believe 200 years from now. So, you never want to grip too tightly to any of these frameworks. They just are best understanding now and the way we talk about it now.

And we know from our research in this model that we use now that the way that we think about things creates our experiences of that. So, any framework, like the framework I'm teaching you, the nervous system framework, the framework from a somatic teacher, the framework you learn from purely somebody who only works with thoughts.

Whatever it is, it's all just different ways of trying to explain something that is opaque to us about what is happening in our brains, and bodies, and nervous systems, and muscles, and tissues, and sinews, and feelings and all of it. What is this human experience that we are having? So, the way that I teach this, is that thought work is the practice of becoming aware of

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how you're thinking your brain's processing whatever that includes impacts your emotions, your nervous system, your actions, what you create in your life.

And then working with yourself to improve your emotional regulation, improve your relationship with yourself. And yeah, change your thinking too because every element of that is important. And your thoughts impact every element of that. Your thoughts about your emotions impact how you experience year emotions.

That's the irony to me is that when I see somebody saying, "Hey, listen, this isn't about thoughts. Here's how to think about your emotions differently. Don't worry about your thoughts." I'm like, "You're giving them a new thought about how to think about their emotions." It's all thoughts, all the way down, your thoughts about your motions impact how you're experiencing them and whether and how you process them. Your thoughts about your nervous system responses impact your ability to understand and regulate your nervous system.

They are not the only thing but they are always involved. That's really the core for me about this work is that sometimes your thoughts are not the only thing going on. But almost always your thoughts are part of what is going on, even if it's just your thoughts about the physical sensation, or emotion, or a nervous system response, or whatever that you're experiencing. So, it's not just all thoughts and it's also not just all any other one thing.

And I actually think that where a lot of this problem kind of comes from, a lot of misunderstanding comes from, or the sort of people divvying up into camps about it's all your thoughts, it's all your nervous system, it's all your body, it's all your blah blah blah. Is that when we're in the mindset of thinking that we are broken and need to be fixed, we are searching for the magic solution. I talk about this also in the podcast, No Gods, No Gurus

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which is where I talk about the idea that I'm not your guru. I don't have all the answers and I don't want you to think that I do.

When we think we're broken and we think we need someone to rescue us and save us, then we are engaging in magical thinking and we want a magic solution. We want one creed above them all to explain everything in our lives. And women, especially people socialized as women, people socialized from other marginalized identities are socialized not to trust their own, our own discernment and our own authority. And I'm going to have a whole podcast episode coming next really about authority and our own authority.

So that equation means that we're looking for The Solution, capital T, capital S trademarked. We want the black and white rule we can follow. We want the guru who will lead us. We want the one thing that we can believe in. We want there to be one creed, one simple rule to follow so we will always know that we are doing it right. And then we can finally, we think we'll finally be able to feel safe and feel okay about ourselves. We want one thing to be the answer to solve all of our problems.

And I think that that's encouraged by the way that there are these kind of pop psychology fads that sweep through social media. One year it's all about boundaries. And then the next year it's all about meditation. And then the next year it's all about the nervous system. And then it's going to be all about something else. And all of those things are useful and important but none of them is the one answer. It's not all thoughts. It's not all emotions. It's not all your nervous system. It's not all anything.

What happens is we want the next thing to be that one solution and so we go all in and we pledge our fealty, and we try to solve all our problems and fix ourselves using that one thing. And then sometimes we have the sort of initial success where actually it solves quite a few things. But always it hits a wall because a single factorial system will never solve every problem.

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And so, then we feel disillusioned and we feel betrayed because we believe that the one thing promised us salvation and didn't deliver.

And to be fair, sometimes we were sold the idea that it would. So, there is responsibility on the parts of people who sell their services or sell their framework as this is the only thing you ever need for any problem. The way I talk about it is this is a thing that helps with every problem, which is very different from this is the one thing that will solve every problem. So, there is responsibility on those of us who does this work and market it on how we talk about it.

There's also a responsibility for us in wanting to be sold that way. It's on us as well to use our own discernment and to notice when we are looking to be saved. The bottom line is we don't need to be fixed, we were never broken. And so, here's what I want you to understand and take away, first, thought work is not just about your thoughts because your thoughts are related to your emotions, your nervous system responses, your circumstances, the world around us, all of it. It's all part of what we call thought work as shorthand, or I do.

It's really like brain body life work but that acronym also stands for Brazilian butt lift which is really not on brand for me, so we can't use that acronym. But it's all about all of it. Thought work is about how to be a more skillful, resilient human. And one of the things that I really – I saw actually hilariously, a post on Instagram about this become such a good point recently and I wish I can remember I saw it.

But there's this idea that right now nervous system regulation is the big thing that everybody's constantly attributing everything to. But you can see even in the way that it's deployed that some people are using it as this perfectionistic way to get fixed, as though the goal is to have a perfectly regulated nervous system that never ever varies or goes into fight or flight, or goes into freeze, or goes into fight, whatever. This idea that there is this

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promised land where if I can perfectly regulate my nervous system I'll never have to have a negative emotion.

So, I'm adding that negative emotion. What I saw was this idea of the goal isn't a perfectly regulated nervous system. But what I take from that and what I think is so powerful is the way of seeing that this belief that we should always have stable emotions or we should always have a stable nervous system, we should always feel regulated. That's actually just another perfectionistic fantasy of trying to fix ourselves to avoid ever feeling uncomfortable. Part of life is having negative emotion.

Part of life is having your nervous system activate sometimes. Some degree of dysregulation of negative emotion of whatever, depends how you define dysregulation. I don't think that we all have to be constantly dysregulated because we've experienced trauma and never done any work to heal. That's not what I mean, but some degree of negative emotion is normal. That's why we say life is 50/50. Some degree of your nervous system getting activated or shutting down and then coming back to normal.

That up down, back to normal is normal, some degree of it. The goal is not to feel calm and perfect all the time. It's to be more resilient so you can bounce back better and not get stuck. The second thing is that thought work does not solve every problem on its own. But I do believe that there is no problem that thought work doesn't help. Because if you are a human with a brain then you have thoughts about every problem in your life.

There is no such thing as a problem in your life that you don't then have a thought about, even if it's a body somatic, nervous system, whatever based thing. Your cognition is observing it and narrating about it. In fact, the whole reason you know something's a problem and you want to solve it is that you had a thought about it. You saw it, analyzed it and decided that you wanted to change it. That's a thought.

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So, bringing awareness and intention to how you are thinking about a problem in your life, a thought pattern in your mind, a somatic experience in your body, that's thought work and that is always a good idea. And this is why I say thought work is a tool you always need. It just isn't always the only tool you need. Alright, so I'm going to say that again. Thought work is always a tool that you need to bring to bear on any problem. It's just not always the only tool.

I will never sell you the idea that changing your thoughts will solve every single problem on its own without paying any attention to anything else. You do have to consider your emotions, consider your nervous system, consider your circumstances. Life is complex and multifactorial but I will tell you from the bottom of my heart and my deepest belief is that changing your thoughts is part of solving any problem, even if it's changing your thought from, I should be able to change this with my thoughts to maybe I need to also use another tool or get some additional help.

That's a thought, it is thoughts all the way down, nothing in your life is not improved by bringing intentionality and self-compassion to your thought process. That's what it means to use thought work intentionally in your life. All of the work that I do is about teaching you how to feel empowered and feel able to navigate this human experience more skillfully, more effectively and with a better relationship with yourself. And I think that that is something that people socialized as women struggle with because we are just not taught that that's important,

We are taught to care about what other people think and respect other people's opinions and believe other people's expertise and not our own. And that is why helping people socialized as women claim their authority in their own experience and use these tools to create the experience they want is my work in this world is so important to me. And I want you to experience what that's like. I want you to know what it's like to believe in your own capacity to make decisions, to come up with ideas, to trust yourself, to trust your discernment, to be an authority in your own life.

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I am so passionate about that. And I actually have created a whole new five day challenge that is all about this because that's how close to my heart and crucial this is. So, if you know that you could use some of that, if this is resonating with you, then I want to invite you to join me in the Claim Your Authority challenge. I did think about naming this challenge, the Stop Giving a Fuck what Other People Think challenge. But it's very hard to link things on Facebook to websites with curse words. We have this problem all the time with my website name.

So, the Claim Your Authority, aka Stop Giving a Fuck what Other People Think challenge, this is a five day challenge that I am hosting live every day. It's October 24th to 28th, 2022. So, it's coming up soon. I am going to do a live training every day where I am either teaching you a tool, a concept and a technique that you can use. So, the way that I structure my trainings is that I always teach you to understand what's going on. And then I give you something to practice to help change it. And you can start to see change right away in the very day that you're practicing.

And so, we're going to be doing that. We're going to be doing some live coaching on claiming your authority on the places in our lives that we are people pleasing or outsourcing our authority. We are going to be on the first day, we're going to be talking about people pleasing, why we do that and how to stop. The second day, we're going to be talking about validation seeking, why we do that, why we look for validation outside of ourselves and how to stop doing that.

Day three we're going to be talking about abandoning our own authority, why we don't want to make decisions, don't believe we can trust ourselves, how to start claiming that authority in our own lives. Day four we're going to do some live coaching. And day five, you're going to be able to attend the Claim Your Authority Masterclass where I dive deep into the subconscious reasons that we are afraid to claim our authority. And the ways our brains will sabotage us as we try to do this work.

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So, there is going to be all that training, and teaching, and coaching. There's going to be opportunities to ask me questions. There is going to be an amazing public Facebook community, I'll be in there, my Clutch coaches will be in there, our amazing community manager will be in there. Last time we ran a challenge, we did a burnout challenge in the spring and these challenges, I only do them twice a year because they are so incredible and intensive. We had more than 2,000 women participate last time which was amazing.

And I just want to read you a few of the comments that they left in the Facebook group just about that challenge. So, this is what our challenges are like. It's incredible how much your brain can change in only a few days.

So, one of our students left a comment on a post in the Facebook group for the last challenge that said, "Last night my husband spontaneously came up to me with a hug and said, "This positive thought stuff seems to really be making you feel better." The beauty of course is that I'm doing it a 100% for myself and not for anyone else. Yet I'm already able to show up so much more fully for the people in my life I really care about." That is the kind of change you can see in just a few days. That was my student, Hannah.

My student Jean said, "If you're tired of feeling powerless to affect your situation and sick of constantly feeling overwhelmed, here is the way forward from exactly where you are." I love this example she gave, "For less than the cost of a fast food takeout meal for our family of four I feel calmer and more able to be present for the people I love."

Humans have this bias where we overestimate what we can get done in a short period of time. Like in the next hour I'm going to do these 12 things. But we underestimate how much we can change in a longer period of time. So, we actually underestimate how much it's possible to change your thinking and your experience even in just a week with focused effort.

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Josephine, who participated in the last challenge said, “Do it. You’ll think you don’t have time but it saves time because you’re likely wasting a lot of time and energy and unnecessary suffering. I adored the whole thing, particularly live coaching. I watched just through the replays as I live in Australia and it didn't detract from the experience at all.”

So, wherever you are in the world you can join the Claim Your Authority challenge. You don't have to be in America, you don't have to be on the East Coast, you can be anywhere in the world and you will have access to the live stuff and the replays.

One of the people who participated in the last challenge said, “This has been amazing week for me. From the girl who passed out 15 minutes in the first episode because I was so tired, and burnt out, and grumpy, and depressed, to feeling like I’m really flourishing my life all in a week.” So, if you want some of that then I want you to come sign up for the Claim Your Own Authority challenge.

So, here’s the thing if you’re in The Clutch, don’t register, you get it for free. If you’re in The Clutch, don’t register, don’t pay for it, you get it for free. If you're not in The Clutch and you’ve been wanting to join, you should come join this challenge because we’re opening The Clutch at the end of the challenge. But if you are in the challenge you can join in the beginning. So, we’re going to be opening The Clutch later this month. But if you’re in the challenge you’ll get a chance to join The Clutch right away.

And if you don’t know what The Clutch is, don’t worry about it, come join the challenge, get your first taste of proactive thought work, proactive intentional mind body life work. Let’s blow your mind together. I cannot wait. So, join the Claim Your Authority challenge. You can text your email to +1347 997 1784, that’s +1347 997 1784. The codeword is just the letters CYA, Claim Your Authority. Or if you’re a bro, cover your ass, but codeword CYA.

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Or you can go to unfuckyourbrain.com/cya. Text your email to +1347 997 1784, codeword CYA. Or unfuckyourbrain.com/cya. Come join us, let's claim that authority and learn to use these tools to create an incredible life. I'll see you there.