

UFYB 264: Conversations with My Partner Part 1: Thought Work and Our Relationship



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. I am excited for you all to hear these two episodes that I recorded with my partner where we talk about our relationship, thought work, what it's like to date a coach, his thoughts about coaching, how thought work shows up in our relationship. We recorded these quite a while ago and so I'm just excited that they're finally being released and I think he's excited too, although he may have forgotten that he did this and is going to be surprised.

Anyway what I want to tell you is that I have a free resource for you, if relationship anxiety is something that you struggle with because we certainly talk in this episode about how thought work shows up or there's a tense problem. It shows up in our relationship but also it showed up in how we came to this relationship.

And so if you are someone who struggles with relationship anxiety. Whether that is around dating, or you're in a relationship and you have a lot of people pleasing and a lot of anxiety about being broken up with, or being left, or what your partner thinks about you. Or you're still in the dating phase and you have a ton of anxiety about finding the person, and text messages, and when you're going to see the person, and what it all means.

Or if you have anxiety about any kind of relationship honestly, because our brains are trained to think that romantic relationships are this super different thing. But in fact our brains can have anxiety about any relationship, friendships, family relationships, professional relationships, neighbors. I have a lot of brain drama about my neighbors personally speaking, maybe you do too.

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So if you have relationship anxiety about any relationship in your life then you are going to want to watch my free training on how to solve relationship anxieties, it's called the Relationship Anxiety Solution. So here's how you can get it. You can text your email to +1347 997 1784, it's +1347 997 1784. And when you get a prompt asking you for the codeword it's just relationship, or you can go to unfuckyourbrain.com/relationship.

Now, listen to me, if you're in The Clutch you don't need this. You have a full in depth course on romantic and sexual relationships, and anxiety that goes on with those and then you also have a whole in depth course on friendship, and social relationships, and social anxiety. So this is the big picture bite sized training that I can do in an hour on a recorded training for those of you who are not in The Clutch.

If you're in The Clutch you've got what you need, go do one of those modules. But if you're not in The Clutch and you do not have what you need then you're going to want to watch this and get some kind of concrete understanding of what is happening within your brain with relationship anxiety and what the secret is to really resolving it. So again, text your email to +1347 997 1784, and when you're prompted for the codeword, it's relationship, or go to unfuckyourbrain.com/relationship.

Gentleman Consort: Oh man, I'm just so itchy already, oh my God.

Kara: These are the outtakes, chickens. Hello my chickens, we are doing a podcast with today the Gentleman Consort, this is his first podcast and he has a lot of feelings so we're going to see how it goes.

Gentleman Consort: And see how it goes.

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Kara: See how it goes. I asked and got a bunch of questions from you guys on Instagram, some of which were very thoughtful and interesting, some of which we didn't totally understand, some of which were inappropriate. And so we are going to be answering the ones that we wanted to answer. So in this episode we're going to talk about kind of the development of our relationship and some kind of questions about thought work. And we just want to tell you guys because this is such a good example of how all the tools come to bear.

Before we started recording this we were looking through the questions. And some of the questions brought up some stuff in our relationship and so we went through all the process just 10 minutes ago where we was brainstorming an answer to a question and then I kind of misheard what he was saying. And then my heart rate spiked and I had a complete stress response and a fear vigilance response.

Because one of the things that sets me off and a trigger that I work on a lot is if I think that I have misunderstood something, or if it seems like something important I have gotten wrong, or a person didn't communicate clearly to me. Or basically anything that makes me feel like the ground under me isn't stable, especially if it has to do with having a misunderstanding about the status of a relationship, or how somebody feels about a relationship, that's a very big trigger for me and sets off kind of my own kind of trauma response.

And so that happened and I feel like I almost wish it had happened while we were recording because it was a perfect example of everything I teach, only because of all the work I have done. And then all the work he's done to learn to communicate differently and for us to be able to communicate well. I had that response but I didn't freak out and I asked for clarification. And then he was able to stay present, and connected, and explain what he was saying.

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And then I was able to hear it. And then we were able to realize that actually we pretty much were on the same page and nothing was really that different.

Gentleman Consort: Yeah, you're presenting it more smoothly.

Kara: I don't know, I thought that was pretty smooth compared to what could have happened.

Gentleman Consort: Yeah.

Kara: Okay, alright. So now you've heard the voice of Gentleman Consort, his arms get itchy when he's going to be vulnerable. Okay, so we're just going to answer, we have a bunch questions from you guys, we're going to kind of answer them. We're going to talk about them and it's going to be your behind the scenes peek for this week. Alright, so we had a question for the Gentleman Consort but I'm actually going to answer it first because the question was, we have two questions.

One was, what was your first impression and then one was, what was your first date. And the Gentleman Consort does not remember his first impression of me apparently. So I'm going to talk about my first impression of him. He's going to talk about our first date. So my first impression of you was we met during the pandemic. So we had a video date first. And you looked kind of professorial, you were wearing a tweed jacket and sitting in front of that brick wall in your apartment.

And if anybody who is listening has met him, which is not that many of you, maybe nine of you met the Gentleman Consort, it's hard to not use his name is just very warm and welcoming. And I often say like a human brain and a golden retriever's personality. Just very warm, and funny, and welcoming, and so people feel at ease when they're around him. And so I

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felt like we had a really great conversation. We had a really good connection. I was excited about meeting him.

And then I texted him right afterwards and said, “Hey, that was great and I’d love to get that walk we were talking about.” And then he didn’t text me back for three days. And I had a lot of feelings. But then eventually he did text me back and then we went on a date. And what was our first date like?

Gentleman Consort: I love the idea that I looked professorial, or that I even can look professorial, that’s terrific. I might actually work on cultivating that now, thank you. No, my first impression, our first date was just a walk around – we were in Central Park. And the date went terrifically well, I thought. I probably talked too much about playgrounds.

Kara: There was a lot of playground talk.

Gentleman Consort: I make a mental note every time I see a playground anywhere.

Kara: Because he has children, just for those of you – that will sound really weird and creepy otherwise, he has two young children.

Gentleman Consort: But the date went, I thought, terrifically well. And I liked her right from the start.

Kara: Why did you like me on the first date?

Gentleman Consort: Well, I mean our conversation was very easy. There was something about meeting you where I felt almost immediately like I was just chatting to somebody who I had known a long time. I’m not sure if that was me desperately wanting to have that or if that’s just a natural ability of yours. I’m not really sure where that came from but it felt like I

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knew you right away, which was terrific. Non-professorially, I wore a sweater apparently which smelled deeply of mildew. I found out about this later and I was rightly embarrassed about it.

Kara: But you guys, I don't want the perfectionist listening to this, I want you to hear this, don't freak out if one thing on a date isn't perfect or you don't show up perfectly. He didn't text me back for three days after the first call. He wore a mildew sweater on the date and we haven't even gotten to how we said goodbye at the end of the date.

Gentleman Consort: Yeah, let's not bother saying one thing went wrong on the date. No, the date was terrific. We had a great time. We talked. We walked around a little lake. And then at the end of the date, thinking things had gone really well, I signed off in exactly the way that made sense by chucking her on the shoulders basically and saying, "Well, nice to meet you, dude." Turning around and getting on the train and heading back to Brooklyn.

Kara: That is what happened. I actually think it might have been an elbow bump because it was during the pandemic. So he was very out of practice.

Gentleman Consort: I was, yeah, this was one of my first dates after separating from a past relationship. And I was not practiced in any way at that point.

Kara: So he gave me an elbow bump. But then what I remember is I had this really – I didn't have thoughts on the date of this is my partner. I didn't feel like, oh my God, the heavens. I liked the date. He was cute. It felt like a good date. I'd gone on a million first dates. It was optimistic but I didn't have some kind of thunderbolt experience on the date. But then when we had this weird goodbye because we left out the part about how after an

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hour at 7:00pm, you're like, "Well, got to go home and get ready for the kids tomorrow afternoon." Which felt like, I had assumed was a brushoff.

And I felt this very intense energetic sinking feeling on the ride home that just felt disproportionate, I mean for sure I had a lot of dating drama and I was working on that a lot. I had been working with coaches on it and it had gotten a lot better, I had made a lot of progress. And I knew that sometimes after you go on a first date if it doesn't work out you can feel kind of a little disappointed or a little down. It's like, okay, it wasn't that person, next one. But that stands out to me, I don't feel like I knew that we were going to be these kinds of partners.

And I don't think it was foreordained that we were. We'd both done a lot of work on it. But I do remember that I had this disproportionately, it wasn't even an emotion I can name. It wasn't exactly sad. It just felt like all the energy had drained out of my body because that goodbye seemed so weird.

But it wasn't because the thing was awkward, it was because there was something about my experience of you had created some kind of energy or emotional connection that then I felt this disproportionate kind of feeling when I thought the date had not gone well apparently because this was the goodbye. But then by the time I got home basically you'd sent me a...

Gentleman Consort: Yeah, I had sent a text. I think there are at least two, three, four, half a dozen things that happened in our relationship very early on that sort of kept the ship off the rocks just at the last second.

Kara: But that is such a testament to two things. It's to communication because it was almost always saved by you sending me a very thoughtful transparent and text of being like, whatever happened, I really like you. I

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want to get to know you. I think this can be good. You just put it all out there. There was no game playing. There was no playing it cool.

Gentleman Consort: Oh, no. Yeah, I was smitten with you right away and I was not playing it cool. I may have been terrible at texting and communicating, and that's something we ended up having to work on over the next 18 months. But I was not remotely playing it cool. I had not intended to meet somebody that I liked that much right away but I absolutely did. I sent you basically a mash note and a text after our date.

Kara: Yeah. It was saved by your communication but also I had done so much work, part of my pattern previously because – and so a lot of you are going to recognize yourself in this is that when you believe that there's something wrong with you, you can't get your relationships right. You don't feel good about yourself in relationships, when you have a lot of thought work challenges around relationships. What happens is that you can go one of two ways.

You either can become someone who will take and accept any kind of treatment and any kind of relationship because you're just so desperate for love and acceptance. Or you can do what happened to me which is I tended to go this other direction where I couldn't see it at the time. At the time I thought I was really openminded and willing to date anyone, and really just want to find a partner. And I was really emotionally available. But actually because I was constantly on the lookout for anything going wrong because I was so hypervigilant about things not working out.

I just would not have been able to be open to. If I hadn't done the work I'd done, any of those things would have kind of closed me off. Or I wouldn't have been able to be like, okay. I had to do so much work on it's okay and safe to feel disappointed. It was really mind blowing to me when I finally figured out through coaching that feeling disappointed doesn't actually

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mean that something terrible has happened and gone wrong and that you therefore can't rely on someone or that they can't meet you emotionally.

Because my previous experience and my kind of patterning was that people couldn't show up consistently emotionally in a reasonable way. And so any human is going to sometimes not be able to, it's a proportionate issue. But I think for me I had to have done all of that work to be able to tolerate some of those ups and downs, and disappointments of early dating, which also I was creating my own disappointment with my thoughts and often completely overinterpreting things. So it's not even like you were disappointing me.

It's just I had not previously had the stability to weather bumps, much less that you were separated and had two kids. And I wasn't looking for children. I mean there were a whole host of things that I wouldn't have been open to before.

Gentleman Consort: Various hurdles, yeah.

Kara: Yeah, although I think in a classic way there was a little bit of this isn't going to be a serious thing so I don't have to be so uptight about it and then there we were.

Gentleman Consort: It's also, I mean this is not exactly answering the question but we've discussed there are a number of things about how I conduct myself. And I think I'm lucky that I met you when I did. I think that in earlier years you would not have put up with some of the...

Kara: Yeah, some of your feral raccoon tendencies.

Gentleman Consort: My raccoon advents, my what do you call it, golden retriever style of love.

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Kara: I still have trouble with it but I've been working on receiving it more. One of the things we still work on is that you come home very excited to see me. And then I have trouble receiving that amount of excitement and affection right away. And so I'm trying to work on growing my capacity to meet that.

Gentleman Consort: And I'm trying to understand that when I come home excited to see her and she's like, "Hi." That it doesn't mean I'm in trouble. It doesn't mean she doesn't love me.

Kara: No, I mean to be fair, sometimes I'm in the middle of doing something. So part of what you might be learning is sometimes people are in the middle of doing things. And just because you show up with a lot of excitement in that moment, doesn't mean that they can automatically be like, "Let me turn off the part of my brain that is three-quarters of the way through a budget calculation to create excitement right away."

Gentleman Consort: Yeah. I'll say that I understand.

Kara: As you can hear, there are things in our relationship that we don't always totally work through. We just let some of them go. So, okay, so one of the things we got asked that I think follows on that is where were you at mentally and emotionally when you met and then how have you grown individually or as a couple? So do you want to start?

Gentleman Consort: Well, I think that's an easier one for me. I had just separated just a few months before we met. So this was sort of very early in the dating process. I was still – I mean working through, you know how I felt about my separation, working through about how I felt about sort of setting up my new life. And I think like I had said earlier, I was not really thinking, hey, I'm looking to date somebody who I intend to marry over the

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next week. I was ready to meet a lot of people and not take things too seriously for a little while.

Kara: And then I happened.

Gentleman Consort: And then you happened, yeah. I don't know, were you, I'm trying to think, emotionally and mentally?

Kara: Where I was. Well, I think I just talked a lot about that. I had been doing a lot of work on my relationship stuff. And I had had this moment, it actually happened right after we met. We met at the end of March, at the end of April I went upstate for my birthday. And I had this big breakthrough that I had been so fixated on looking for the specific kind of love and relationship in my life as though different types of love were sort of so different and it was going to be a completely different experience.

That it was so distinct from friendship love, or family love, or mentor love or whatever. And then I had this breakthrough that there was already so much love in my life that I was sort of ignoring because I was so fixated on finding. It's like if I had 10 apples at home and I was like, well, if I just find this one slightly different variety of apple, that's going to change my whole life. So I had that big breakthrough three or four weeks into us dating, not really because of you, mostly because of all the work I'd been doing.

So I think that was one of the reasons I was able to have more resilience, be more open. Be more open to the fact that you were a lot of what I had wanted in terms of characteristic but in life situation not what I had been looking for. I had been looking for somebody who had no kids and was location flexible, single, no kids, and could live anywhere in the world. And instead I found somebody who was...

Gentleman Consort: An old guy [crosstalk] with two children.

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Kara: Right. Just the most fixed constrained schedule in the world. Has to go to an office nine to five every day, has a biweekly – I always forget biweekly, every week has two children under the age of 10 for several days of the week so you can't go anywhere for more than three days at a time. So I think all that work was really required for me to be open to this different connection. So how do you feel like we've grown as a couple?

Gentleman Consort: Well, we actually talked about this one just before we began. And I thought it was going to be awkward because I feel like I have changed so much during our relationship that it almost doesn't apply to you, that it's just, this has all been about my growth. But I'm sure that's not true. I'm sure this is one of those situations where I'm just reading [crosstalk].

Kara: Yeah, I'll talk about mine first afterwards but you go first.

Gentleman Consort: I mean I am from the Midwest. And we're not going to get into exactly how my family and I have lived our emotional lives. But to say my family and I had emotional lives would be tricky. So hooking up with a Jedi level life coach who wants to not have any emotions or feelings that aren't immediately expressed and dissected, took a long time. And we actually had some near relationship ending issues when we would get into emotional conversations.

And I would actually just reach this, literally just reach a mental breakdown and go into an almost catatonic state. Because I just couldn't figure out how to deal with and respond to the amount of openness that seemed to be demanded from this relationship. I loved the relationship, I just, I couldn't function and I would literally shut down. This isn't a metaphor.

Kara: No, he would have a freeze nervous system reaction just like an autonomic shutdown in his body and he would not be able to really

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articulate things. His brain would kind of slow down. You could see the whole nervous system shutdown happening.

Gentleman Consort: One of the numerous situations along the way that could have imperiled our relationship, I think your thought about it afterwards was, oh, oh, what have I gotten into?

Kara: Just after the first one.

Gentleman Consort: What's wrong with this broken human being?

Kara: That is not what I thought but definitely I did forget about the first one, that's another example of a place of having done enough work to be like, okay, wait, let me try to figure out what's going on. And not just be like, well, he does this, it'll be this way forever because as it's turned out it's not been that way forever. We've both done a bunch of work on it.

Gentleman Consort: Well, and it was hard because you wanted to know what had happened and I just didn't have answers for you. I didn't know. I'd just never really been confronted with situations where sort of this level of openness and honesty was going to be expected in a relationship. And I would have not assumed that I had an inability to deal with emotional things. That I wouldn't have thought that I was somebody who would suddenly just feel this paralysis over the idea of talking about emotions, but yeah, surprised, there it was.

Kara: And so where do you feel like you are now with that? I think there's been a lot of growth.

Gentleman Consort: Yeah. Well, I mean this is why I feel how we've grown as a couple is almost more of a question for me is I feel like I've made such massive changes in that. We've joked about how there's sort of the idea

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that after, assume you can't change somebody you're dating. Somehow or another you've managed to change me an awful lot.

Kara: But I think you were ready for change. One of the question we got, some of the questions were like, how can I make my partner x, y, z? You can't do that. You came to me I think and in a place of okay, I want to try living my life in a different way.

Gentleman Consort: Yeah. I mean the one thing that was consistent in all of the relationships I had had over the last 50 years is they had all ended and most of them deadly. So I was obviously ready to, you know, if there was another way I was interested in trying to find it and trying to live it. So I was definitely open and receptive to the idea of setting these things up in another way than I had.

Kara: Yeah. And I think for me one of the things that I realized early on and I didn't articulate it until later, but when I think about, I have definitely dated people before who had kind of shut down reactions to emotions. Which is common, especially the way men are socialized to just shove down their emotions and not have them. And I hadn't really tried to invest all the time and energy into trying to work that out with them. But you were so in touch with your positive emotion that I just felt like this person has a very kind of – it was like your emotions were actually pretty close to the surface.

It's just that you hadn't learned ever or hadn't been taught ever how to connect to and deal with the negative ones. But it was sort of very – I dated people where it was like they were just emotionally shutdown overall. That's very different from, with you I was like, well, first of all, I can tell when he's having a negative emotion, it's actually quite on the surface. It's just that he's kind of got a shutdown from it himself. And also your positive emotions were very on the surface. So it's all there. It's just it felt almost like it was like finding a diamond in the rough a little bit.

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It was sort of like if this person wants to, I think they could develop actually a pretty deep level of and facility for the kind of life that I want to have which is very self-interrogated and we all have blind spots. I don't mean like we're all so self-aware. But just thoughtful, just intentional, and thoughtful, and reflective.

Gentleman Consort: Well, and as a distinction, I wasn't somebody who was unemotional. I was just somebody who did not ever bother to examine, pay attention to or have any real interest in my emotions.

Kara: Yeah, you would have really strong negative emotions but your coping mechanism was just shut down, ignore it until eventually it passes.

Gentleman Consort: That's not happening, what's the thing I can do instead.

Kara: Right, yeah, we did a lot of we're not going to take any actions, we're going to talk about our feelings. We had a very memorable fight in a car in a parking lot in California.

Gentleman Consort: No, it was not just in the parking lot. That went on for a while. A lot of things that have happened in our relationships that are meaningful have happened in cars while on trips.

Kara: I will say for those of you who have – this is a real thing, people, especially the way that men are socialized I think sometimes when you try to have a conversation face-to-face it can activate more of a threat response. It's like a predator prey kind of thing. If you have a conversation where you are both looking forward or looking in a different direction. So you're walking, you're driving, whatever, it actually really can help your brain relax.

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And I think especially for you having something else you're doing while we're having the conversation is helpful but that's true for anybody. If you have trouble with communication because one of you gets really stressed out by it, or shuts down by it, or gets kind of feels aggressive about it, whatever. Try having conversations. You have to do emotional work too. It doesn't work to be driving and screaming at your partner and expect to get a response. But walking, sitting next to each other but looking out at something instead of each other driving can help.

But anyway, the point of that story was we worked through this, that was when we were working through this whole thing of acknowledging emotions even if you're not going to change your behavior is still important.

Gentleman Consort: This is super true though, the idea of the extra task. I feel like, if we were fighting in the kitchen, my impulse would be to start washing the dishes so that I had something else I was doing while we had the conversation. I think even subconsciously I know that that...

Kara: That that helps you, yeah. And I think that depends on, you know, people's brains work different ways. And some people are more distractible than others. And it's helpful to have a thing that they're kind of focused on.

Gentleman Consort: Well, and we both know I'm not distractible.

Kara: Never, never, yeah. I don't feel better with an activity and I've had to learn actually. But this has been part of my learning with you. We've adapted to each other is, when he needs to do a thing while we're talking, in the beginning I would take that as meaning you aren't going to have the conversation. You were trying to ignore me or whatever. And now I'm like, no, he will be better able to have this conversation if I let him put together an IKEA cabinet while we're doing it or whatever.

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Gentleman Consort: I'm handy and from the Midwest. If we had a radial arm saw in the basement, I would want to have all of our emotional conversations while I was lining up the drill press.

Kara: So I already talked a bunch about how I grew as a couple but I would just say that I think for me it's been more variations on that theme, learning to be more receptive, learning to be more open, learning to be able to tolerate disappointment and not make that mean something about the relationship. Everybody gets disappointed, it's not that you've disappointed me. You've exceeded my expectations in so many ways.

Gentleman Consort: The way that I've grown in this couple is by learning to deal with disappointment.

Kara: First of all, our brains create disappointment. When I feel disappointed I am disappointing myself because I made up an expectation. I think this is a real thing that doesn't get talked about enough in people who have relationship problems. The end ability to tolerate disappointment because your nervous system, and your history, and your wiring make it feel like it feels like being a small child whose physical needs aren't being met. And so there's this huge threat response to it. It has actually nothing to do with you actually disappointing me or you doing anything disappointing.

It can be not getting a text back in the time that I thought I wanted one when you've done nothing wrong. It's not about that. But this is serious and I want everybody listening to hear this because if you are somebody who struggles with intimacy or has trouble in relationships, and has a lot of anxiety, that ability to tolerate feeling disappointed, or feeling sad, or feeling rejected which is something that I know we all struggle with sometimes, is tolerating feeling rejected. It's the same thing.

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That disappointment is really a feeling of rejection or a need not being met. And if you have history, or wiring, or whatever, that makes you very susceptible to that, it's a real thing. Learning to be able to have that emotional experience and not make it mean something about the relationship. Because what I used to do would be I'd be super into somebody but then the first time I felt rejected or disappointed then in my brain that meant there's something wrong with this relationship, it's not going to be good, it's like an all or nothing thinking.

And it's completely normal in any relationship that you are going to basically disappoint yourself with your own expectations or thoughts and then the other person isn't always going to meet them.

Gentleman Consort: I'm glad I gave you so many opportunities, it's important to you.

Kara: Okay, this is not really the takeaway here honey.

Alright, chickens, that was part one of questions that you had for the Gentleman Consort and I. This episode was getting really long so we cut it into two parts. And next week we're going to be talking about some of the more unusual aspects of our relationship, so tune in for the rest of it.

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