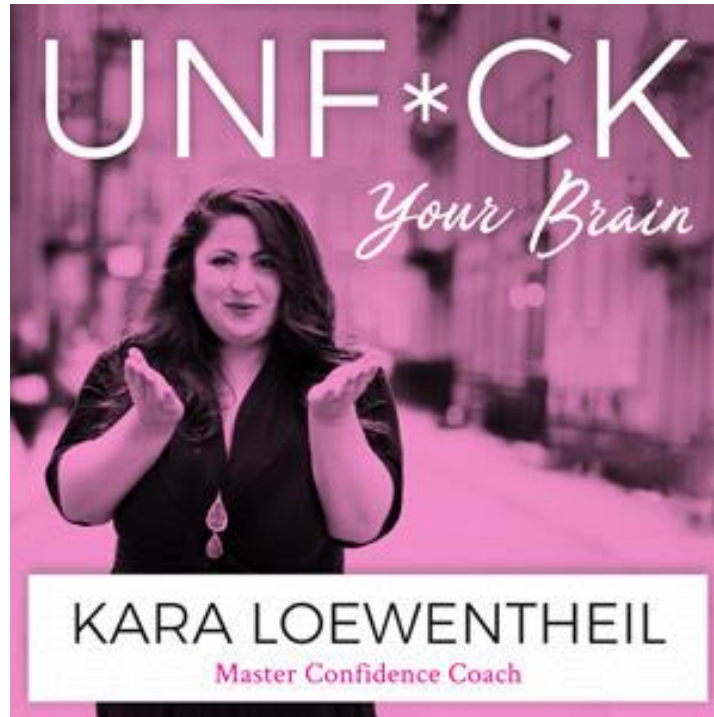


**UFYB 267: Being in Charge & Working Motherhood:  
A Conversation with Sarah Nicole  
of The Papaya Podcast**



**Full Episode Transcript**

**With Your Host**

**Kara Loewentheil**

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## **UFYB 267: Being in Charge & Working Motherhood: A Conversation with Sarah Nicole of The Papaya Podcast**

Welcome to *Unf\*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard Law School grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello, my chickens. So here's my question. Have you ever looked around and just kind of thought am I really in charge of what's going on here? I'm an adult now, I just do things on my own. I have this weird feeling every time I rent a car where all of a sudden I feel like I'm 17 or something. And I'm like, "They're just going to give me a car." Which makes no sense because I could literally walk into a dealership and buy a car at any time.

But there's just something about that like I'm in charge here feeling that I think potentially something that women experience more than men because of our socialization. That is something that I talked about and you're going to hear in this episode that I'm talking about on the Papaya Podcast. So for those of you who don't listen to the Papaya Podcast, you will not have heard this conversation. And it was so juicy that I wanted to share it with you. We talk about not only that sort of like wait, I'm the adult here.

But we talk about the sort of beliefs women are fed and taught that our value fluctuates. We talk a lot about being a working mom and the conflict inherent in that and the tension that women experience. I actually coached Sarah, the host of the Papaya Podcast through some kind of mom guilt that's coming up for her on the episode. So we really dig into a lot of I think core issues that touch on so much of what we talk about on this podcast. And it was such a rich conversation that I really wanted to make sure that you all heard it.

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So without further ado here is my conversation with Sarah from the Papaya Podcast and I hope that you enjoy it as much as I did and I think she did recording it.

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Sarah: We are finally sitting down together today to have a conversation about un-fucking your brain. And this one felt really different for me. We've heard sort of sentiments about this before but this is what kind of took me into a place where I was like, yeah, no, we need this. You believe deeply in women's empowerment but you don't always feel empowered. You feel a nagging disconnect between your high achieving life and the insecurity and anxiety that plagues you. People will say you have it all and yet you don't feel like you're enough. Three words, fuck that noise.

Kara Loewentheil, thank you so much for being here. I loved your website, first of all, I'm sure you get this a lot, when you see people are like life coaches they're just like, "We've been served so many versions of life coaches." And so when I went to your website and I was reading a little bit about what you were talking about especially just women's empowerment but not always feeling empowered. And just that notion of feeling very high achieving but also struggling with anxiety. I just felt like you were reading out to me my worst secrets and biggest fears in these three sentences.

But I can imagine a lot of people relate but I would like to start sort of with who you are and what you do and let's get into sort of rewiring our brains a little bit. How we get out of sort of some of this thinking.

Kara: Yeah. Well, first of all thanks for having me. We were just chatting about how it's been three years in the making.

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Sarah: Yeah. No, three years in the making for sure.

Kara: I am super excited to be here. I follow you and read your social media on stuff. So yes, I am a life coach and I think when people hear the word 'life coach' they think of a lot of different things, some of which there's a lot of different life coaches. I mean it's sort of like saying I'm anything else, like I'm a lawyer. Well, that does mean? Are you a family law practitioner? Are you a constitutional law professor? There's a lot [crosstalk] billboard for ambulance chasing. There's all different versions.

So the work that I do is what I call sort of feminist practical philosophy which means that we are really thinking about the big questions which are what is the purpose of my life? What am I doing or how do I know what's true? How do I choose what to believe? I really think that when men ask these questions it's philosophy and taught in schools. And when women ask these questions it's like self-help like IL, and Barnes & Noble, and the library. So to me these are the big questions that humans have always wanted answers to.

And I think I became a coach as somebody who was a, as you said, high achiever. In the kind of more mainstream traditional world. I went to Yale for college. I went to Harvard Law School and then I had a successful legal career. I worked in reproductive rights litigation. And then I was an academic and my last job before I became a life coach was running a thinktank at Columbia Law School which is the normal job you have before you become a life coach. And so I made this jump.

But the thing that had been true for my whole life was number one, being a raging feminist and have never burnt my bra, and love men. That's not, feminism is not a dirty word. And feminism's got a bad rap. And two, that I always was just, I felt like I was always looking around at the world and just

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being like, I feel like there's got to be a lot better way to do most of this, just being a human is challenging and hard. And most people don't really seem to have a great handle on how to do that.

And so I was into psychology, and I went to therapy, and I got into meditation, and I got into yoga. I did all the things you sort of do, not from a place I never felt like a spiritual seeker. It really was much more from being a human is a crazy experience. And somebody has got to have figured out a more skillful better way to do this. There have got to be some things I could learn that would help me understand my life and manage it with more intention.

And then I found coaching and so the work that I do now is I really focus on helping people who are socialized as women, identify the ways that society has impacted their brains. What society has taught you to think explicitly or implicitly. And then how to change those thought patterns. So it's sort of cognitive change and there are a lot of mindset coaches, a lot of cognitive coaches. There's also therapists who do cognitive work. But my focus specifically is how does socialization impact our brains and how can we rewire that?

Sarah: That is a lot to unpack. We're going to try a little bit today.

Kara: I'm sorry.

Sarah: No. We're going to go for it. But I'm so fascinated because as a woman yes but also as somebody who is now mid to late 30s, that recognition and realization that this is adulthood. And I think a lot of us and I talked about this on TikTok recently, and I was really shocked by the answers. Where we're just feeling like we're supposed to feel like an adult at some point. And it sort of feels like we're faking it. It sort of feels like

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we're imposters in the entire job and yet you look around and you're like, But I have a job, I have my children, they're cared for.

We're doing everything. I don't know that I'm doing everything well, or perfectly, or balanced, these notes that we would love to have. But being an adult even in general and that realization that this is it, has been a very terrifying awakening for me, sort of like this idea that I'm actually the one in charge and the decisions I make are going to impact the rest of my life. There's not always going to be my parents to swoop in and do this for me although I still rely on them greatly.

Is that sort of intersected a lot with this sort of work, is that recognition of oh my gosh, this is it, that this is what life is and we have to figure out a way to find joy, peace in it and navigate it especially as women with the full plates we have?

Kara: Yeah, absolutely. And there's a lot of different ways that intersects but I actually want to talk about that, like I'm in charge here feeling. Because I think that women experience this more than men because women are not socialized to see themselves as authorities or as leaders. So we're socialized to see men as basically adults the minute that they're close to adulthood. And this comes from centuries in which, thousands of years in which in many societies, anything I'm saying is very broad brush. So I'm not saying, obviously it's never true in every society.

But in many societies throughout much of human history women were second class citizens or were considered the property of their husbands. They were considered more like children, their brains weren't as good as men's and they couldn't be trusted to make their own decisions. They needed the guiding hand of a man to take care of them and make their decisions for them. And so yeah, so thousands of years and we've only

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decided that women in the US could be trusted to vote for about a 100 years. And could be trusted to have a credit card for 30 years.

So no one said to me as a child, “You can’t be trusted to make a decision.” That’s not what most people explicitly are telling women anymore but this culture and society are all shaped by it. So I mean I do think there’s just a little bit of a normal weirdness. I still every time I rent a car I’m like, “I could just drive [inaudible], because I own a car.” So it’s not even like I now have some new freedom. There’s just this weird adulthood to somebody being like, “Here’s a vehicle, do you what you want.” But I do think [crosstalk] that more.

Sarah: I think I also feel it a little bit around taxes because I went from being in a marriage where somebody else did the taxes, being back with my parents where somebody else helped me do my taxes. Being married again where somebody else helped me do my taxes. And I’m like, “Do I have to learn my taxes or am I really good at delegating?” There’s parts of that too. Why are there entire gaps within our own knowledge?

But you make a really good point and it’s something that I’ve really struggled with, a discomfort with is recognizing earning an income and that being something that is not just something exciting or something that’s like you’re contributing to the household. But you might also be carrying it. And I was saying this to my husband. I’m like, “I can imagine this is something that you’ve dealt with, that you’ve had, you’ve grown up having those experiences with it. But I’ve only ever had dabbling experiences in it. I’ve only ever really”, and without giving too much away.

I basically took all of the money I’ve made at work and I invested it in one thing. And if it doesn’t go well then that’s all the money I’ve made. So there is this mass responsibility now that’s sitting on my head and I’ve never had

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that before because like I said, besides the window in which I was a single mom, I still, I had two jobs, I knew what my income was. I was very confident in it where now I work in a variable income and there's a lot more riding on me. And I have such a discomfort around being a provider because it is not something that I ever grew up.

My mom was always the contributor income. I was the stay at home mom in my first marriage. This is the first time that we're kind of like we're both equals in terms of bringing in if one of us didn't have an income we wouldn't sustain. So it is sort of dually impacted but I'm struggling with the feeling of having that. And that kind of comes into this a little bit of a powerplay for myself where I'm like, "Wait, I want this. I want the equality. I want equal wages. I don't like this feeling though, this sucks. I don't like feeling like it's all on my head.

Kara: Yeah. I think absolutely. I mean one of the things that sort of doesn't get talked about enough I think is that any form of oppression, equality, any form of power dynamic usually, not always, obviously there are situations in which where people are enslaved, there's no benefit to the enslaved people. But in something like sort of gender hierarchy or gender power dynamics there are small benefits like you don't get drafted into the military. Or you are not expected to be the financial head of the household.

Now, obviously many women are whether they're single or married, they're the person doing the earning. And I think historically that would be the case and yet still their husband would own their money, own them even if that guy was just laying around drinking beer at the pub all day and his wife was the one out working at the market. He still owned all the money she made. She still didn't have those legal rights. But women aren't socialized with that same thing.



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And I mean we're making progress but if you think about it now it's still so much more common for in the heterosexual partnership the woman to stay at home and raise the kids, and nobody really bats an eye. But when a man does, it's still a thing. And I work with, I mean one of the things I think is really fascinating about how we define kind of feminism or liberated relationships is when I worked in reproductive rights I worked in a non-profit. And when you work in a non-profit in New York City you get paid not really enough to live, not that much to live on in New York City life.

And so there is this weird dynamic where almost everybody I was working with, 100% called themselves a feminist, were feminist blah, blah, blah. And some of them were living on what they made and it was tight. But a lot of them were married, they were mostly women and they were mostly married to men who were investment bankers who were bank rolling that. And then I became a coach and I was in this much more ideologically diverse world kind of and a lot of my close friends and colleagues, at least before I came along didn't identify as feminists.

Although I think I have swayed some of that and they're all retiring their husbands. They're the ones making the money. They're the ones supporting the family being that provider. So I do think there is a lot of that socialization where men expect that they're supposed to grow up and get a job and be the provider. And women, it's more like opt in or opt out, kind of up to you.

Sarah: Yeah. I mean it's coming up more and more how many people are choosing not to have children because it's not something you inherently have to do as a woman. Being a woman doesn't mean being a mother. And being a mother doesn't mean you lose your motherhood to it. And I think that's a big one that a lot of people struggle with is am I less of a woman if I'm not a mother? And if I am a mother am I less of a woman? We have this

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battle where men are like, they just become dads and then they're just still men.

Kara: Right, it's not at all consuming, which isn't all the same of course, these are choices that some women have and some women don't have. If you're middle to upper class, maybe you can decide that you want to stay at home or not. If you are a poor woman or a woman who has to work a job, where both people are working jobs and you can still barely get by, this isn't one of the options.

Sarah: Yeah. It's so nuanced. Even as, when my kids were little because childcare was so expensive and I couldn't earn a living more than that. I stayed at home circumstantially. I wish it would have been more of a choice but it was a circumstantial one because childcare was more money than I could bring home in a day. So I think it's really important, even when people talk about how good childcare is for a person or how amazing staying at home is that you understand the nuance of not everybody is staying at home for a choice.

Not everybody's putting their kids in childcare out of just pure choice. Sometimes it's necessity.

Kara: And there's also so much gender socialization than that though because it's so rare that we would say that a man, "Well, your salary's equal to the childcare so why don't you stay home and I'll go." It's always, we talk about women's work as though caring for children and whatever they do out of the house is just an economic equation as if a woman's professional satisfaction or desire to contribute to society in a different way, or just desire to not be a daycare provider if that's not what she wants to do, even for her own children as if those don't have any value.

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It's like women's work is, when we do put an economic value on care work, it's in this very limited sense where women, either their work has no economic value or it's only economic value and we're not thinking about anything else. Maybe they don't want to be home all day with the kids even if what they're bringing in is identical to or a little less than what daycare costs.

Sarah: Yeah, you said it. Now, as somebody who has been in this for a while now, what would you say are things that people, women especially are coming in and needing to unfuck their brains from the most? You must see these common overlaps. And I'm sure for us we all feel incredibly alone in them and everyone's coming in being like, "I'm struggling with this. I don't know anybody else who is." And you're like, "Hi, I listen to 25 of you every week."

Kara: Right. Well, I'm like, "Well, there's 3,000 people in this group, you all have the same thought pattern."

Sarah: Isn't that wild? Okay.

Kara: Yeah. And I use that all the time because I actually think on the surface there are some people coming as like, "I'm really so sad about work." Or, "I have bad body image." Or, "I can't seem to get the kind of relationship I want." Or, "I have so much anxiety around it." Or, "I have a difficult relationship with my family", whatever. I mean the fact that I think some coaching work is sort of, I think of it as vertical which is I help people who have a bad relationship with their moms. And it's just of any background, any thought, whatever.

And mine is more horizontal, I'm working on how your brain's been impacted by socialization, so literally every area of your life is an area that

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counts. But I think the thing that is the root of all of it is that women are socialized to believe that they do not have inherent value. Women are taught that their value is like the stock market. It goes up and down depending on how they look, how many people want to fuck them, what other people think about them, whether they've made everybody happy that day, whether anybody anywhere disapproves of them.

We are socialized that you could feel amazing about yourself and you walk out of the house, any stranger says something about your appearance and your self-esteem is shot for the day. It's bananas, that's not objective. But that is how we're socialized. And so I use that all the time when I'm like, "Okay, it's possible that there's 3,000 people in the world who don't have any inherent worth and value and they magically ended up in this coaching membership together." Or maybe everybody has inherent worth and value but what are the odds that all of you are here?

Or everybody has it but women are taught, are disconnected from it and are taught that they don't. And that their worth or value is basically like a running average of everybody in the world's thoughts about them.

Sarah: I actually just was reading an article. There's so much chatter about Brie Larson in the Marvel movies. And what kind of a feminist she was and that she must hate men and all of these things. And I read an article that she had in Vanity Fair I believe it was and I screenshot it because it was so good. And she had genuinely never needed to look at the internet to explain to me who I am. She added, "I am extremely committed to that in my day-to-day life."

And I thought oh my gosh, it's so true because even if you're just not even as a creator, you're just posting things online or observing things online. Or I one time made a comment on a celebrity's photo, just a supportive one

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and people were like, “How could you? Why are you supporting?” It was Britney Spears, of course I love her and everyone was like, “How could you be saying, she’s obviously going through crisis and you’re just encouraging her.” And I’m just like, “Yeah, I am.”

But you can’t walk through online spaces without being told or reminded what the world thinks of you, what your family might think of you. And we even create scenarios I think about this for myself every single time I’m hesitant to go do something because I’ve a bad body image day. Let’s just claim that because that’s been a big part of my last year has been stepping beyond that. And so you go and you step outside and you’re not thinking about how you’re experiencing it or your own discomfort.

You’re thinking about made up realities in everybody else’s head and that’s when you know you’ve been socially conditioned to just be like you said, how fuckable am I, are people going to like me, am I acceptable here, is this all okay? Even just last week I was on a work trip and a friend of mine asked if we wanted to go down to the pool. So I was like, “Okay.” And all I had was a skimpy little bikini and I’m like, I don’t really get that bared down in front of my friends. Sure, I do it for two million people on the internet.

But do I do it in an actual pool setting? And the whole time I was sitting there and reminding myself, look at this, remember this, your friendship hasn’t changed. Nothing’s changed. They’ve not made a single no, sure, they’ve seen a little bit more of your body now in real life and look how much hasn’t changed. Look how much you’re just enjoying yourself being here. But I still move through the world constantly thinking about what everybody else has got going on in their brain and having to step beyond it.

Is there a way to stop even thinking about that? Is it just going to be managing the thoughts that we do have?

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Kara: No, it's changing your thoughts. So what you think other people are thinking is going to be a reflection of what you're thinking. That doesn't mean other people aren't having all sorts of thoughts but I'll just give you the example for me. So people can't see me, this is a podcast but I live in a fat body but in the scale of the fat community, would be small fat. I can shop in plus size stores. I have privileges, I've got hour glassy and very femme presenting, whatever. But I used to hate my body and body image was the first big area I did this work on which is why I believe in it so much.

And so any time I went out I used to assume that anybody who was looking at me was thinking that my body was disgusting. And I did all this body image work. And now when I see people looking at me on the street I assume that they think that I look good. That's just my default assumption. The truth of course is that at any point in time both would always happen, undoubtedly when I thought everything was negative some people were thinking that I was fat and gross. And some people were thinking, I'd like to hit that.

And now I feel amazing, still I am sure the reality is probably the proportions have shifted somewhat because my confidence is different and I present differently. But still, a 100%, fat phobia is a real thing. Some people are thinking gross judgmental thoughts. Some people are thinking I'd like to hit that. So sometimes when I say your thoughts about what other people are thinking are your thoughts, just your thoughts about yourself. What people hear is you're saying nobody's judging me because of my weight, or race, or whatever.

And I'm like, no, 100% they probably are but what you think about and what you imagine, that is a reflection of what your primary internal talk is. So when my internal talk was negative, I assumed that everybody else thought negative of me, even though at that time reality was probably 50/50 or

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whatever it is, 70/20, doesn't matter and now same thing. So that's how I know we can change it. But thought change is never a process of let me try to stop thinking the thing because you don't want to do that.

That's like trying to say, "Let me stop blinking my eyes." You can hold it for a minute but then it just automatically takes over. And also when you tell yourself to stop thinking something, your brain is the thing that has to establish is you're thinking it or not. So in order to scan for if you're thinking it or not, it has to think it so it just doesn't work. What you have to do is replace that thought. You have to train your brain to think something new. Your thought patterns are habits. People may have heard the phrase, neurons that fire together, wire together.

Sarah: I've never heard that saying.

Kara: Really? Neurons that fire together, wire together. What that means is that the more often you have a mental habit of some kind, whether it's a thought, or when your brain learns how to carry out a physical action. When you learn to drive it's like there's so much happening, it's so overwhelming. You're totally overwhelmed because your brain and your body have never done this before. Over time those neurons fire together and wire together and it becomes habitual. You no longer have to think about it. You're not freaked out by it.

You can do it on autopilot while you're talking and listening to music. So the same is true of just thought patterns. As you start to think something new on purpose to replace your old thinking, it'll be weak at first, it'll take a lot of effort. You've got to constantly remind yourself to think the new thing. But over time those neurons get stronger and you literally build neural connections in your brain, that thought process gets wired together and then eventually it becomes the default and you stop thinking everything.

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Sarah: Yeah, I think about this all the time where I do this myself, the first thought, second thought and it's very much based around first thought, forgiveness. That whatever you're thinking in your first thought you have to forgive yourself for because that's your conditioning. And the second one is who you're becoming. That's what I tell myself every single time I think something really shitty of myself. That's your conditioning, let's replace that with something else. And I will say, as time has gone on, of course there's times that it really pops up and is very hard to avoid.

Like you said it's trying not to blink. Mom guilt is a big one. I mean I don't know that I will – and then work guilt on top of that. If I'm doing too much that's when I feel work guilt.

Kara: That's so common, working moms are always guilty either way.

Sarah: I know. And this is why I own that title and people will challenge me on using the term, 'working mom' because we don't use it for working dad. But I think it's important for me to honor the duality of what I'm doing and recognize I am both mom and worker. And that I'm constantly needing the reminder that I'm doing both. And that sometimes those really align well with each other and sometimes they crash and collide and it's not super pretty. But that one really comes up for me a lot, so that guilt part of for instance just dropping my child off at childcare.

The guilt being like, I should have figured out a way to sustainably still work my job and care for her. Of course I'm getting emotional, so I just dropped her off so just [inaudible]. But then the second thought being, I'm making a responsible decision based on her needs being met and my needs being met and us coming together later with both of our needs met. That's still a lot for me to process because I'm sitting in the thought one. And I'm sitting



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in, I just want to be with her. And I also want this career that I've worked 14 years for.

I remember the second I got pregnant my first thought was, there goes my career. And that shouldn't be your first thought after you find out that you're expecting is there goes my career but it genuinely was. And we've done so much work to unpack that, so much work to add support and make sure that I am supported. But there's still even almost two years down the road dropping off my kid being, "This feels so wrong." I don't know what it is but it feels so wrong.

And so really working through those second thoughts today when the first ones are, if we're talking about blinking, my eyes have been closed half the day. I can't help it, I'm so in it.

Kara: But there's this socialization that women get that makes you feel like when you're having that kind of feeling that you must have done something wrong, that something has gone wrong.

Sarah: That's so true.

Kara: As opposed to of course this is sad, I love two things that literally can't happen at the same time. And that's okay but we make it mean we've done something wrong. I love, anybody you have an attachment relationship to like you have with your child, I have with my partner. I both hate to go away for work, it's painful, we're very attached to each other. I like to be with him. And I love my work. And if I'm not judging myself then I can just hold that space for the human experience. I love two things that can't happen at the same time right now, how human of me.

Sarah: You're so right.

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Kara: Yeah. There's a yoga meditation teacher named Judith Hanson Lasater I think, that's her articulation of a concept from Buddhist teaching for centuries which is basically it's just acknowledging your own humanness. That takes down the suffering so much. Then it's just like, of course, I love these two things and I want to do them both and I can't do them all exactly at the same time. And this feeling is okay, it's just part of my human experience versus what women are socialized to think which is I feel bad, I must have done something wrong.

This must mean something's gone wrong. This must mean I'm balancing it wrong, or I'm doing it badly, all of the self-judgment piles on top of what is a normal emotional experience that we don't have to judge.

Sarah: Thank you for that. Thank you for that little therapy session that I personally very much needed.

Kara: That's coaching, everybody, in case you're wondering.

Sarah: I've selfishly just overtaken this podcast for my own free life coaching session.

Kara: No, but I think that's so helpful for people because people can hear an abstract but that's an example of how to reframe thinking in the moment.

Sarah: I have to ask too in terms of does this make me a bad feminist type of question. We're talking about how much we've been socially constructed to base our value on how fuckable we are. But also wanting to sort of own our own sexuality and wanting to be fuckable. A big part of my work is not coming with my body anymore apologetically which I feel like is very much were I started a lot of it, very much like I am worthy of being here. Now being like, I'm actually quite desirable. I actually think I look like a bomb.

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I actually don't think having stretchmarks, or loose skin, or a larger size is inherently sexually bad. I want men to recognize that. How do we live with the duality of those types of thoughts where we're like, "I want to really own [inaudible] based on what men think of me." But also I kind of want them to think good things because I want to kind of help – not help society make men like women more. But I want to help women sort of own their bodies again in a way that is not owned to men but also understanding that sometimes we do that.

And this is obviously a cis role sexual relationship type of conversation. But I kind of wonder how do we navigate confidence in even our bodies, understanding that it's sort of still baselined around something that is not so feminist, I just want to be fuckable or I feel fuckable and that sort of thought line?

Kara: Yeah. Well, the good news is I am here from the International Association of Feminists to judge whether thoughts are feminist or not. So you've got a full ruling. No, it's not up to me of course. The way that I teach this stuff is you're never going to completely de-socialize your brain. So I'm not a purist by any means. We're never getting there. And the truth is some of this stuff is, now, I want to be really clear. I do not think that evolutionary biology explains why women should be size 8 and have big tits. That's how it's viewed sometimes by gross men's rights people.

And no, if you look at the world, people have many different shapes and people want to fuck them so it's not that. The primary driver of I want to be sexually desirable, for a lot of people, not everybody, some people are asexual, some people are demisexual. But for a lot of people there is some hormonal biological push that way. So between that and the fact that you can't completely undo socialization. Socialization is also how we know to

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pee in a toilet and go in a house and what things are safe to eat. So we're not trying to revert to the natural state and become Bonobo tribes, live it.

So I think the question is always for me, there's two things to always look at, well, three things. It's really what is the thought that's pushing us. It's the framework that I use is the sort of your thoughts create your feelings, create your actions. And also what does that create in your life, what are your results? So number one, how does this feel? It's awesome to feel like I look hot today and I feel good. But are you crushed when you think you look bad? There's a difference between this is cool and this is fun but I love myself no matter what.

And my self-esteem is up and down, up and down, up and down based on how many people try to hit on me in a day. So it's like what's the feeling driving it? Can you do without it? What is the thought driving it? I think if you look at humans anthropologically, almost human tribes of any kind tend to have, for instance, some forms of body modification or body adornment. There's a natural human instinct for aesthetics, for sexual desire obviously. Do I don't think it's about getting rid of all of that.

But it's about what if the Botox and the makeup, and the pushup bra and everything weren't available, would I be able to love how I looked there? So it's not really about the men or whoever, whether you're trying to appeal to only, if you're a lesbian trying to only appeal to a certain type of other lesbian or whoever you are. I don't spend a lot of time to being what's the good in bed feminism? I'm not fucking in charge, who knows? And there's no one answer. But how do you feel and are you dependent on it?

The problem with some of this sort of 'empowering beauty culture' is people become dependent on it. You want to get Botox occasionally, fine. You feel

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like no one will want to have sex with you, that you can move your forehead. That's a problem.

Sarah: Yeah. What's your motivation? And I've felt that so many times. I would say that people would maybe consider that I've gotten things 'wrong' in the past. But I have such a lack of judgment for other people because I understand what it took for me to get to the place I am. I used to get up and put strip lashes on before my boyfriend, now husband would even see me in the morning. I was so committed to my attraction and my value was based on my looks and my makeup and how good it is because it was very much a timestamp of what I was going through in my life.

It wasn't anything that he projected onto me, it wasn't anything else except for yeah, beauty constructs and stuff. So then as time went on I got into the self-love and stuff. And I'm taking off the makeup and I'm trying to do that. I felt robbed of something that I actually genuinely loved which is this moment in the morning, getting ready and doing my makeup. And I felt robbed of it and judged for it. Same thing with coloring my hair. Do I not love myself enough because I'm putting bleach on my hair? Is this a choice? What does it look like?

So yeah, at this point, I'm like, "I don't care if somebody actually is still struggling with feeling so much value in their makeup and not being able to show their face otherwise", because I was that person. I remember what it was like being there. And I know that I'm now at a place where I don't care either way. I leave the house with makeup and without it. But I acknowledge what inherently feels right for me based on how I'm doing. Sometimes I genuinely just love that moment in the morning of getting ready.

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And it's not about doing it for anybody else but it took a long time to take it back and do it for myself but it's still, I think what happens a lot of times is let's say somebody goes completely makeup free for years. Those wearing makeup around them might be like, "Why are you doing that?" And they're like, "I'm just really trying to love myself without makeup." People will inherently hear, am I a bad person for wearing makeup?

Kara: Because women don't, because they question their own authority and they doubt themselves.

Sarah: That's just it, so we just create judgments based on each other and what we're individually doing. I have people all the time that are like, "I have followed you for so long and I've really loved your work. I just also want to let you know I've decided to get a tummy tuck." And I'm like, "Why do you think that I would be upset about that?"

Kara: Why are you telling me?

Sarah: I am nothing but happy for you because I think there's this because I chose not to do that that I'm on some higher ground. No, absolutely not. I so believe in body autonomy that a friend of mine just recently went and got a gastric bypass. And I'm like, "What can I do to support you? I'm here to do anything for anyone and that has nothing to do with my past experiences with my body." Show up for each other. It's so interesting to me that we live in a world where we're very much fighting for the rights of women to have choice around their body.

But also ripping them down for their individual choices as well. It's just so messed up and I feel like a lot of times I'm like, "Well, man did this." But the reality is I think that we're really doing it to each other too. Is there ways that we can get around?

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Kara: Well, it's both though. Because I don't think, I think we have to frame the question correctly. The problem with beauty culture is not that an individual person wants to wear lipstick and they should. The problem with beauty culture is that people are penalized in serious ways, in their professional lives they are pressured to get plastic surgery. They are taught from a young age that they can't find love if they don't look a certain way. That's the problem with beauty culture. And social movements are very complex.

There's individual responsibility and it's true that individual choices and individual patterns impact what the cultural narrative is. But at the same time going after individuals on Instagram for their personal choices is probably not the social change movement that you think it is. When our bigger problems are we're not framing the problem correctly. I mean there's this writer, Jessica DeFino who I love who if you don't know, I would check it out. She writes about the beauty industry and she also focuses a lot on the ways that beauty culture can be like diet culture.

And also beauty culture is very connected to the climate crisis which is not something that I was super aware of before I started following her work. And she's kind of like, "I don't care if you buy this thing because I'm judging you morally. I care that 90% of the beauty industry is based on petrochemicals that come from oil production and we have a global systemic corporate problem here that is not about did you get your tummy tuck or not?" So I think we have to take a step back and okay, why do we care about this? What do we want to do about it?

Yes, there's personal actions we can take but spending your energy evaluating and judging other people's individual choices does not usually produce a ton of social change in my experience.

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Sarah: What are some ways that we can work towards just even unfucking our daily lives? What are some key things that you notice that people are stumbling upon a lot, whether it comes from body image, whether it's advocating for themselves in the workplace or in their relationships? What are some key tips that you might have for us that just are looking for? Maybe that we don't have one big thing that we're struggling with, it's just this overwhelming sense of overwhelm. Do you know what I mean?

Kara: Yeah. I mean I would listen to, I have an episode called The Thought Ladder. I never remember to look it up and see what number it is before I get on the podcast even though I recommend it every week, but I can go to it right now.

Sarah: The Thought Ladder, okay.

Kara: We'll put it in the show notes let's say. So my podcast is called Unf\*ck Your Brain, there's an episode called The Thought Ladder. And that is kind of the core tool you can use to get from what you're thinking about any issue to what you want to believe. The reason you need a ladder is that most – a lot of people have heard of affirmations or positive thinking. And for a lot of people those haven't worked. And the reason that they haven't worked is that your brain's reward system, this is like a simplification but it's useful, it basically runs on dopamine.

Dopamine is a chemical that makes you want to do things. So it's the reward chemical. And so part of the problem is that when you try to believe something that is way too far from where you are, so I always use the body image example, this is one of the first things I worked on. I thought my stomach was disgusting. And so my thought 25 times a day was my stomach is disgusting. If that is an incredibly neural network that you have



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built in your brain from 30 years of thinking that 25 times a day. You cannot just start thinking I am a beautiful goddess and feel amazing.

You don't believe that in any way and so you do not get any emotional payback or any chemical reward in your brain for practicing that thought. It's like saying to myself, the lizard people are in charge. I don't believe that, so nothing emotional happens in my body, nothing chemical happens in my brain.

Sarah: That's a good comparison.

Kara: Yeah, I'm just repeating nonsense syllables, I could be saying like our *argobargobargo*, it doesn't create an emotional – that creates more emotion because I think it's funny compared to – so most people have heard affirmations of positive thinking. And if they have tried it either they've dismissed it out of hand because they're actually right they're like, "I can't believe that." Or they've tried it and gotten no payoff. The secret to fucking life is to practice baby step neutral thoughts that move you a little bit at a time from your negative thought to what you want to be thinking.

People want to feel good right away. As with anything in life, it will not feel good right away. If you never exercise and you decide you want to feel amazing exercising, guess what? The first little while feels like shit, because you can't breathe and you're sweaty, and you're not used to it, and your brain thinks you're on fire.

Sarah: And you can't sit on the toilet two days later.

Kara: It hates it but that's normal, that's part of the process. If you want to learn to cook, you need a lot of bad burned under-seasoned food along the way until you learn how. The same thing. It's like being like, "I'm going to go

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in the gym and then I want to deadlift 400 pounds immediately.” That’s how you break your back. So you cannot, start with something little. So the thought ladder goes into this but for instance what I used with my stomach was, that’s a human stomach. It did not feel great. It did not feel amazing. It was not inspirational.

I always say, your neutral or your thought ladder thought should not qualify to be on an inspirational Pinterest graphic. It should not look good, like needlepointed on something or on a rainbow. You’re just trying to feel 10% less shitty.

Sarah: That’s achievable. We can do that. We can feel 10% less shitty.

Kara: Right, and then you build on that over time and then people overestimate what they can do in a day or a week. We’ve all made to-do lists for Saturday that later we’re like, “What was I thinking? That’s three weeks of work.”

Sarah: Whoever wrote this list was a very different person.

Kara: Was crazy, what is happening? But we way underestimate what we can do in a longer period of time. It’s a bias human brains have about time. So if you practice thoughts and you feel 10% less shitty for six months, or a year, or two years, you will move so far up you will be at that amazing thought that you truly didn’t think you could believe. You have to earn your way there. You can’t just say it once to yourself, not believe it and be like, “Well, thought change doesn’t work.”

Sarah: I love this because it’s not even like it’s not positive affirmations. It’s 10% neutral affirmations and that should be a book.

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Kara: Yeah, 10% less shitty.

Sarah: 10% less shitty affirmations.

Kara: Like “I think my stomach is disgusting but I also am still worthy of eating today.” Or “I think my stomach is disgusting but many people have this stomach.” It’s literally, you’re just trying to feel a tiny bit better in your body when you think about it, which might still feel bad compared to neutral. Might be still well below neutral.

Sarah: I think this is such an echo into what we’re experiencing on social media right now, the things that five years ago felt so jarring to see somebody without makeup or bearing their stretchmarks for the first time. And now five years down it’s become so mainstream. But I also think it’s sort of in a collective of 10% less shitty or 10% just going a little bit more neutral. It makes me excited to think that in 10 years from now it’s not even going to be a conversation, maybe it will be. I’m sure we’re always going to have some form of conversation.

Kara: Yeah, beauty culture has been around for a long time.

Sarah: It’s going to take a minute but I do think that we’re going to have a better grip on it or maybe at least a little bit more understanding as we move through it and we make these inherent individual choices with it. I think it’s also fascinating what you’re doing. To be honest we’re sitting here and I’m having so many aha moments because you’re very good at your job first of all. But second, it’s really nice to have somebody that’s not promising big grand things but a 10% is a 10%. That changes your life.

And I don’t think that we give enough credit to, if you can do something, if you can feel 10% less shitty, well that’s 10% less brain energy that’s going

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to that thought. That 10% that's going to go into your family, your home, your job, whatever else, your passions in life, 10%.

Kara: And it's up to the big grand thing. That's what people don't understand. Americans are so socialized to want, this is a very American thing, we want the quick fix, we want the overnight transformation, we want the before and after on People Magazine. I lost 100 pounds in 20 minutes by just starting at a grapefruit, whatever nonsense. 10% less shitty over a year, two years, five years completely changes your life.

Sarah: Yes, it does. You're incredible. Thank you so much for this conversation today personally and for everybody listening. If this never airs I am just grateful. Tell everyone where they can find you, where they can plug into your network, your community as well because you're apparently doing some really amazing stuff, I'd love to hear about it.

Kara: Yes. You can find me at, well, the Unf\*ck Your Brain podcast is available wherever you listen to your podcasts. You can go to [unfuckyourbrain.com](http://unfuckyourbrain.com), you can find more about me there. You can find the podcasts there. And you can find the waitlist for The Clutch which is my feminist coaching community. We only open twice a year for new members. We'll be opening in late October 2022. And then on social media my name is long and hard to spell, but it's @karaloewentheil. If you get close it'll probably [crosstalk].

Sarah: Yeah, it might just go to you.

Kara: Yeah, there's no one else with my name. So if you start with @kara and you get the L-O-E-W in there you'll probably bring it up.

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Sarah: Amazing. Well, thank you so much for everything and for everyone listening. I'll make sure all of the spelling and everything is in the notes as well. And we will see you next week. Let's all just feel 10% less shitty this week. That's our goal. I love that goal for us. We'll see you next week.

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If you're loving what you're learning in the podcast, you have got to come check out The Clutch. The Clutch is the podcast community for all things Unf\*ck Your Brain. It's where you can get individual help applying the concepts to your own life.

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