

UFYB 270: Plan A Plan B: The Secret to Resolutions



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, it is the official start of the holiday season. And I can tell that mentally I am really ready to be done for the year. I am up for a six week nap but unfortunately I still have to write quite a bit of a book. So just details there but I am looking forward to things slowing down, being able to focus on the book, spending some time with friends and family. And inexorably I think as the holidays wind on we start hearing and thinking about New Year's and New Year's resolutions. And I've done a couple of episodes on New Year's resolutions in the past.

And at the end of this episode I'm actually going to give you a quick free way to get all of them sent to you. But today I want to introduce you to a concept that I call plan A, plan B. And this is a great tool for when you're setting any kind of habit based goal. But I think especially around New Year's when we tend to be at our most kind of perfectionistic, aspirational goal setting time of year or you can even say our most delusional time of year because a lot of the time our New Year's resolutions are just totally out of touch with whatever we've actually been doing so far.

And there's this kind of, I think it was originally a tweet maybe, that turned into a meme, but there is this whatever, a social media graphic that goes around that I share every time I see it. That says something like, "I have made my resolutions all of which require me to demonstrate a level of discipline, and consistency that I have never once displayed in my entire life. And obviously I don't think that these things are about willpower or discipline. If you've been listening to the podcast you know that.

But the core of why it's funny is what rings true which is that we set these resolutions or we set goals at any time of year that just have no relationship

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to how we're currently living. And that's why they're not sustainable, they depend on us like we set a resolution on December 29th that depends on us being a completely different person on January 2nd. So in the previous podcast I've done kind of around end of year and also goals in general I've talked about resolutions and goal settings in terms of how to choose a goal, when to make a goal realistic, when to make a kind of big reach goal.

And in previous podcasts and again at the end of this episode I'm going to tell you how to get all of them sent to you. We have a text campaign or a URL set up where you can just go put in your information and then we're going to send you links to all of these. So if you really do want to dive into goal setting and resolutions you're going to get a little package that helps you with that. But in some of those podcasts I have talked about the minimum baseline which is the idea of setting a goal that seems so small that you know you can do it. And so your brain tells you that it's not worthwhile.

So it's like if the delusional goal is an hour of yoga a day when you currently do no yoga then a minimum baseline goal might be 15 minutes of yoga a day or 10 minutes, or even five minutes and building up from there. A good way to tell if you're using a goal as a fantasy for kind of like a dopamine rush, or to feel better about yourself is if you're in a rush to get there. So you don't want a set of reasonable goals that you can build up from because you're not actually thinking about what's best for you long-term.

Obviously it's better for your body, long-term to do 15 or even five minutes of yoga every day forever even if you never build up from there, than it is to do an hour a day for five days and then fall off the wagon and never do it again. One of those is clearly better for you physically than the other. But when we are using a goal as a fantasy to feel good then we are in a rush to experience that fantasy kind of chemical experience and we don't care what's actually possible or sustainable.

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So I talk about all that in depth in the previous episodes that you can get the links to. I'm going to tell you how in a minute at the end of this. But I want to talk about what's in this episode first.

So this episode assumes that you have set a solid goal that makes sense for you and you've figured out that baseline. And this is especially important if you've set kind of a reach goal but even with a minimum baseline you are more likely to succeed if you come up with a plan A and a plan B. And so that's what I want to teach you here. So I came up with this tool when I was coaching lawyers back when I first started one-to-one coaching. Many lawyers have unpredictable schedules. If you work in litigation, or if you work in a big firm and your schedule can really vary wildly.

Sometimes if you're a litigator you have months that things are fairly calm, you're building and developing your cases but nothing is crazy. And then you'll have a case coming to trial and you'll be working like a madman. Where sometimes you're in a big firm, especially if you are a newer lawyer and your schedule's just very unpredictable and you're not in control of it. A partner will all of a sudden have something that they just need you to do immediately, or somebody will bring in a new matter, there'll be an emergency on the case, maybe a deal's closing, maybe a merger's happening, whatever's happening.

And then there'll be quieter times between cases or after you finish a big deal. And you'll have more control over your schedule then. So we would come up with a plan when I was coaching lawyers who had these kinds of uncontrollable schedules sometimes so whatever it is, like the plan for their workouts, or their plan to be cooking more at night, or a plan of going to their cello lessons, whatever it was. And the plan was usually based on the times when things were more stable schedule wise.

But inevitably the shit would hit the fan and everything would go haywire. And then they would fall off the wagon and beat themselves up and tell

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themselves they should be able to keep doing that initial original plan even when they are working 50% more all of a sudden and they would just give up altogether. So I introduced them to the concept of plan A, plan B. This is super simple but it will change your habit setting life. So here's how it works.

When you create your habit plan, you create plan A. That's what you do when life is cooperating, that's the plan you follow. But then you also create plan B. And plan B is what you follow when life is not cooperating, when you're working more, when you have a sick kid or your kid's having a sleep regression and all of a sudden you're not sleeping. You're just exhausted. Your spouse is out of town, you're solo parenting, or you're taking care of a sick parent, or the house is being fumigated or whatever it is. Plan B is the most simplified, most doable version of the plan for when your life is not going smoothly.

So for example let's say that plan A is that three times a week you want to run five miles on a pretty trail near your house because that accomplishes multiple goals for you, you have a goal to be outside for 20 minutes a few times a week. Or you have a goal to be in nature, you have a goal to run, you have a goal to move your body, whatever it is. Your plan B might be that when shit has hit the fan you're going to run two miles on a treadmill at the gym in your apartment building twice a week or once a week. Or your plan B might be you're going to go for a 20 minute walk once a day while you listen in on meetings that you have to attend on the phone.

And if you're working on a minimum baseline goal where you've already made your goal quite minimal. This still applies because the point is that however minimal something is if it is based on and built into your regular life and then something goes wrong, or things get busy, or you get overloaded, you still need a step down option. So if your minimum baseline goal is 15 minutes of yoga every day then maybe plan B is five minutes a day. And if your goal is five minutes a day maybe plan B is five minutes

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just three times a week or maybe plan B is two minutes of just lying down and noticing your breath every day.

No matter how simple or minimum baseline your goal is, you can always have a plan B for it. So I want to explain an important thing about this which is why it's actually better to do this than to just see how it goes. I think some of you listening to this are like, "Oh my God, that makes so much sense. I'm doing that right now." And some of you are thinking, no, that's not good enough. I'll just wait and see and I bet I can figure it out, or maybe I will be able to do it all. So I want to tell you, don't do that, here's why.

It's because of a decision and negotiation cost, mental cost. When you have to make a lot of decisions especially when you're already tired, you're already overwhelmed, your brain is going to exhaust you. When you are negotiating with your brain and debating what to do and beating yourself up, all of that is a drain of your time and energy.

And when you need plan B, when you're in that situation where you're working 50% more hours all of a sudden, or your kid is not sleeping, or whatever else is happening, or you're going through a break up and that's really stressful hard, whatever's going on. You're already short on mental energy and focus, and clear thinking. So waiting until then and then trying to figure out how much you can do is not a good idea.

Deciding ahead of time what you'll do when plan A isn't going to work, prevents all of that time and energy wasting thought process, because making the decision ahead of time. So all you need to do is execute it. It also requires you to do the thought work upfront. If we don't set a plan B, then when things get crazy we might just say, "Fuck it", we stop doing our habit altogether, or we agonize over not being able to do everything and we beat ourselves up. And then we go back and forth about whether we're letting ourselves off the hook or not and then we're mean to ourselves.

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We have all this emotional drama, that shit is a waste of time. When you decide on plan B ahead of time it requires you to do the self-coaching that you need to do to make plan B a reality. Setting a plan B ahead of time requires that you confront your perfectionism now. When you have the mental resources to do that it is much better to deal with all of the thoughts about being inadequate, and being lazy, and letting herself off the hook and blah, blah, blah.

It's so much better to deal with that stuff now ahead of time so that you don't have to coach yourself when it's time for plan B and your resources are running low. When you don't set a plan B ahead of time you get to that busy or stressful period. And now you've got to use brain energy to try to figure out what to do instead because you didn't decide beforehand. And you've got to try to use brain energy to manage your mind about whether it's enough or what you should do.

That's why people just stop doing everything, but if you set it ahead of time, then you get to work through all of your perfectionism, and your inadequacy thinking, and all your self-beating up, all the beating yourself up. You get to work out all of that now because now is when you're deciding on the plan B. So now is when all those thoughts are going to come up about how it's not good enough and all of that.

And now you get to do the thought work and the self-coaching now to believe that it's always better to do something rather than nothing. To give yourself the compassion of not expecting yourself to behave like a fucking machine and be able to do the same things all the time no matter what the conditions are. All of that self-work and self-coaching work is so important. And if you set plan B ahead of time you get to do that now when you actually have the resources for it.

So that is my recommendation for you for all of your resolutions. And if you really want to dive into what I teach on goal setting like what's a

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perfectionist fantasy, what's a minimum baseline goal, how to know what kind of goal and when to set the goal, all of that, I have several topics that dive into this. And we have set up a totally free way to get all of those episodes just sent to you all at once so you don't have to go hunting and pecking through the podcast feed.

So just text your email to +1 347 997 1784. That's +1 347 997 1784, you'll get prompted for a codeword, the codeword is just resolutions, plural. Or go to unfuckyourbrain.com/resolutions. Again, that's unfuckyourbrain.com/resolutions, and you just give us your email and we will send you a list with links to all of the episodes in which I have talked about, goal setting resolutions especially, and that will be a real deep dive for you on how to set solutions for a 2023 that you actually will do.

And how to think about goal setting in general so that you can be consistently setting and achieving goals throughout your life rather than setting 10 goals and doing none of them every year as your New Year's ritual. Let's not do that this year my chickens. Alright, text your email to +1 347 997 1784, codeword, resolutions. Or unfuckyourbrain.com/resolutions. Again, totally free, just give us your email and we will send you all those links. Have a beautiful end to 2022 my chickens. I'll talk to you soon.