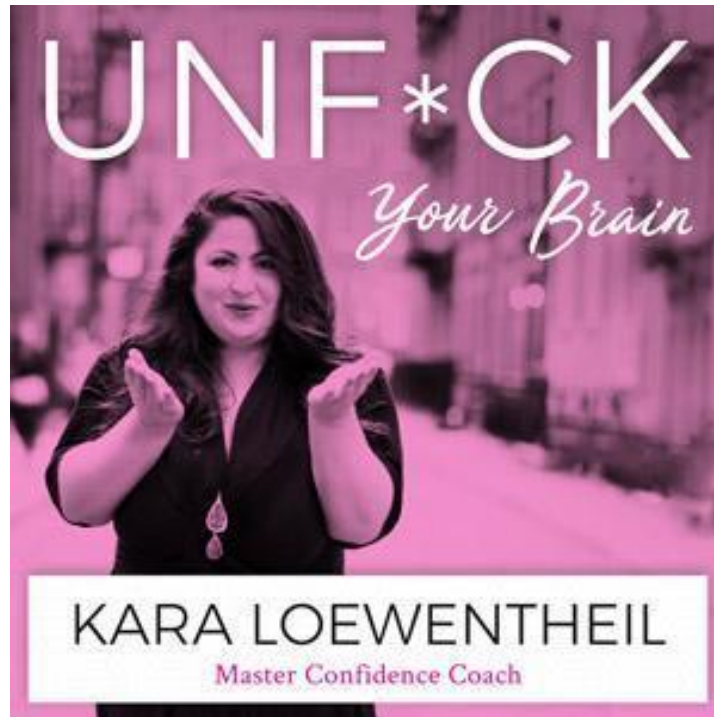


UFYB 291: How to Stop Criticizing Everything and Everyone Part One



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB 291: How to Stop Criticizing Everything and Everyone Part One

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

Hello my chickens. How are you? I feel like this time of year is just barreling towards summer. February and March can feel fucking endless. And then suddenly hi, it's almost June. The perception of time is a weird, weird thing. Anyway, that is not what we are here to talk about. Today we are here to talk about criticizing other people and how to stop doing it. This is actually going to be a two part episode because I wrote this and I was like, "Wow, that's long. This is too much." So we're going to do this in two episodes. In this episode I'm going to be more talking about diagnosing and understanding the problem.

And then in the next episode I'm going to teach you more on what to do about it and what I've been doing about it. So I feel I need to give a little bit of a framing and disclaimer for this because I know that some of us have our hackles going up already, especially our feminist hackles. That this is not an episode about how ever expressing your opinion is criticizing or that women should just be nice and gentle and whatever nonsense like all the dumb shit online that's like, well, if you just don't expect anything of your male partner then he'll be motivated to step up and provide it.

That's obviously not what I'm talking about. Criticism is not the same as asking for what you want or sharing consented to feedback or stating a boundary or letting someone know your opinion on something when it's kind of appropriate and warranted. And I'm sorry that there's no clear bright line rule for when feedback is feedback and when it's an opinion and when it's a request and when it's a criticism. We have to use our discernment.

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And I actually kind of want to get a little meta about this because I think often when we perfectionists hear a new concept we get obsessed with the edge cases, the far extremes, the most complex examples. And we think we have to be able to understand those perfectly to have certainty and be able to use or practice something but we really don't.

You don't have to be 100% convinced that your thoughts cause all your feelings and everybody else's thoughts have caused everybody else's feelings from the start until the end of time, amen. In order to just see if changing one of your thoughts helps you feel and act differently in one situation in your life. That you really don't have to do an entire debate about a full concept spectrum of a theory in order to just try it a little and see if it helps.

I mean I am somebody who has had that full challenge of thought work and this work that I teach and has turned it inside and looked at it from every angle and I never discourage anyone from using critical thinking. But I will say that I did not really do that until probably a year in. I really did the grappling, the full scale grappling when I got trained as a coach. And I was like, "Okay, well, I'm teach this to other people. So I've really got to 100% believe this, make sure I can explain it all. Make sure I understand the answer to any challenges."

But when I just learned this as just as a person I just was like, "Well, this sounds like it might help, I'm going to try this perspective or this approach." And then I found out that it helped and then I kept doing that. Sometimes we want a perfect theory before we're willing to do any experiments. And I see this with so many decisions we make. I can't make this decision in my business till I know if it's the perfect strategy. I can't go on a second date unless I'm sure that this person could be someone I would want to get married to.

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Any scientist will tell you that a theory can only develop through experiments. You have a hypothesis but then you test it out. And almost all the time, at least some of the time some of it is wrong or all of it's wrong and you adjust and you keep going. So all of that is to say as you're listening to this episode, but just also as you're listening to the podcast, let's try not to get hung up on the edge cases of when it might be criticism versus feedback or whatever else. Let's not go to the extreme counter examples.

Just listen and see if this resonates with you and if so, try it out. And the more you try it out the more you'll learn how it works and feels for you. And then you'll be able to answer those questions. And if it doesn't resonate with you then that's fine. Bless your heart as they would say, let's skip to the next episode. So everyone else, if you're still here, let's talk about criticism. So there is no perfect bright line and rule. And I'm going to talk about how it's subjective in a minute, but let's just start with some kind of definition so we have something to work with.

And the dictionary suggests that criticism is the expression of disapproval of someone or something based on perceived faults or mistakes. So I actually really like this because I think it captures three things that are important about criticism in the way I'm talking about it. The first one I was going to go through [inaudible], the first one is expression. So it's not just having a thought about someone or something, it's expressing that thought, quite often not having been invited to and doing so anyway. So proactively expressing the thought.

The second is that it's disapproval, that we don't mean it as just a neutral observation that there is a moral judgmental element to it. That is really important because it's what transforms our subjective opinion or offer or suggestion into criticism.

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And then the third thing is that the definition includes perceived in it. The definition includes the idea that criticism is someone's subjective perception. Criticism is not pointing out an objective flaw that everyone would agree with. It's your personal opinion. Or if it's being offered to you, it's somebody else's personal opinion. And it's inherently negative in the sense that you're not pointing out a positive or something neutral. You're pointing something out and saying, "I see this thing about you or about this thing you created or whatever and I think that's bad."

So part of what I want to do in this episode is talk a little bit about why someone would have a tendency to think this way because if you are aware, some of you may be listening and you're not even aware that you're very critical. And so this episode is really about you bringing awareness to this pattern. Some of us are aware that we're very critical. And I think we are self-critical of ourselves for being critical, of course because we have a brain that's critical. So a lot of shame around it and a lot of defensiveness around it.

And so I want to talk about the several good reasons sort of that our brains may operate this way to kind of help you understand this, that you're not making it mean something about you personally. There are a million reasons people have the habit of criticizing and this is not a comprehensive list of them all. I just want to go over a few of the reasons we may think this way. And you may recognize yourself in some or all of them.

So first, our brains just have a bias for negativity. I talk about this a lot on the podcast in simplified evolutionary terms. Remembering danger is way more important than remembering pleasure. From a survival perspective, just not thriving, just pure surviving, passing on your genes, living long enough to reproduce. Noticing what might be bad or dangerous is way more important than noticing what might be good or fun. Bad or dangerous things might kill you and then you don't reproduce.

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So over millennia, organisms that were good at getting scared of noticing what's bad or dangerous and we're good at scanning the environment and seeing any threats, outlived the ones that thought everything was great and fun. And they should just lie in the middle of the field with their eyes closed and then they got eaten. So this is a very simplified explanation obviously but evolution has selected, we theorize for organisms, animals, people that are very good at noticing potential danger.

From a survival perspective there is very little downside to seeing a lot of things wrong, even if most of them aren't actually a problem because as long as you actually avoided death with one of them, you got to stay alive and that tendency got passed on. Whereas you've only got to be wrong once about missing danger to die. So this is why your brain is like this on an evolutionary biology level.

Your brain does not keep this to only actual survival. That's not how your brain works, it applies this to everything. So this is why when you're receiving critique, you can get 10 comments of praise and you will feel them less and remember them less than one comment of critique. And when you look at someone or think about an idea or whatever else your brain is primed to look more for what's wrong or could be better than what is already right or good. So that's evolutionary biology and psychology and all of us have that tendency to some degree.

I think some of our brains are more that way than others, that can be genetic, it can be epigenetic changes to the genome that happened through your grandparents and great grandparents experiences. I grew up Jewish so that's thousands of years of people being persecuted and killed probably. There is a lot of selecting for people constantly scanning for what might be wrong and having a very hypervigilant system there.

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And then second, some of us learned to think this way growing up. The joke in my family was that if you bring home a 98 on a test then your parent or grandparent is going to ask, "What happened to the other 2%?" It's not really a joke. That's what actually happened. So I mean it's a joke in that we laugh about it having happened but it's not a joke as in it's not true. And I am not the only person who grew up in a family like that. That those can be kind of cultural conditions, that is also a stereotype about Jewish families or about certain immigrant communities as well.

Depending on how you were raised, you may have been raised with kind of high expectations and constant criticism and that being a sort of formative part of our cultural identity or a family experience. And so if you grew up that way where there were very high expectations like that, you probably were unconsciously trained to look for what was missing or what was not good enough even if something was already very good. And if you experienced this growing up, you may actually have learned that this is how love is expressed, this is what family life is.

And so that patterning is going to be in your brain getting applied to your kind of family of choice, your partner, your children, maybe your friends or your family of origin too.

Third, some of us have brains that like to get dopamine from finding and solving problems. And that can be for a lot of different reasons. But some of us are very good problem solvers and that can be a real asset in a lot of areas of our lives. And some people develop this because they grew up in emotionally unstable or challenging circumstances or experienced childhood trauma that kind of pre-exposed them to want to try to be alert for danger and prevent it from happening. Some of us just have brains that work this way, we see problems, we see solutions.

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Some of us have dopamine regulation issues, different kinds of neurodivergence and solving problems gives you dopamine. So if you have dopamine regulation issues you may have gotten kind of dependent on using this as a method of creating some dopamine for yourself. So some of us have trained our brains to feel satisfied when they find themselves a problem. And so your brain may actually go looking for problems that really are not there or don't need to be there or don't need to be solved.

And then fourth, some of us were trained professionally to always look for problems however minor. I certainly was trained this way as a lawyer. And I was also raised by lawyers but I see it also in doctors and architects and engineers. Many professions that require advanced degrees or training are training you to search endlessly for what might be going wrong and then try to solve or prevent it.

So that's four reasons that you may have a tendency to always look for what's wrong or to criticize. And my brain has all four of those factors, that's how I know about them. There are probably others that I'm missing but for me I am basically constantly looking for what's wrong or what could be wrong or what could be improved or fixed. It's not always that I think something is actually actively wrong or bad. It's even just that I think this could be even better.

Sometimes I can actually feel it happening. I will be sitting on my couch, my beautiful living room and a house that I love, reading a book, nothing is wrong. And I will look around the room and it's like my brain is looking for something to improve or fix. And I do this to people close to me. I have gone in depth into this issue which is why we have this episode. For me, I don't particularly do this with friends but it's a family thing for me. So my partner, my bonus kids, my brain is constantly percolating on what we could work on next or improve or fix.

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And I'm like that about myself. I'm constantly working on something in myself. And a lot of my coaching journey has been learning how to separate wanting to grow or evolve from judging myself and criticizing myself. And more than think this way, I always want to express it. And I think that the desire to express criticism is equally interesting because it's one thing to have the thought but it can feel very hard to not express it. So there can be various causes for the origin of this kind of tendency to critique.

And then there's also the desire to express the critique. So I think the desire to express the criticism comes down to power and control in a few different ways. I think the first and most obvious reason that we want to express it is that we think that the circumstance causes our feelings, whatever it is, the way that person is dressed, the problem we see in the draft memo, our kid chewing with their mouth open, whatever it is. We think that that thing that's happening or the person who's being that way or whatever is what's causing our feelings.

So we think that if something was different we would feel better. And so we want to get the thing changed so we can feel differently. So this is just kind of your standard thought work thing. We think that if the circumstance was different we would feel different and so in order to try to feel different we try to manipulate or change the circumstance. And we think if we express this criticism maybe that will get somebody to change something. Another reason I think we want to express it is that dopamine thing that I talked about.

If we've trained our brain to get dopamine and feel good from solving problems, then just noticing a problem doesn't do it. We need to solve the problem to get that dopamine. And if that's something we can do on our own, great, but often it involves someone else. So if we need someone else to change something in order to 'solve the problem' then criticizing them is

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part of that. We want to point out the flaw and get them to change it so we can feel like we solved the problem.

I also think it can be about kind of a misguided desire for safety. Our brains think that if we can control everything around us we will be safe. We won't have to have any feelings we don't want to have. We won't have to have any kind of tension about the world not being the way we want. And so we're just trying to control everything around us that we don't like and change everybody to be the way we do like it, them or everything to be the way we like it so that we can feel safe.

And I think it can also be about power which is something that I think we find hard to admit. But I think that if we have felt powerless in the past, especially if we felt powerless because we were the one being criticized in the past, whether that's in childhood or by a boss or by a partner or by a friend. If we went through an experience of being in a relationship where we were criticized a lot or in a context where we were criticized a lot and we felt powerless we may unconsciously associate being the criticizer with being the powerful one.

And so we want to reenact that either in the same context, if somebody's criticizing us we want to criticize them back. Or often in a new relationship we want to reenact this dynamic but we want to be the criticizer. We want to feel powerful. Of course this is not conscious, but this is how our patterns can show up.

So that was a lot. Let's say you recognize yourself in some or all of this, what can you do about it or do you need to do anything about it? That is what we're going to talk about next week. So tune back in and this week if some of this sounded like you, pay attention to when the desire to criticize is coming up and what's going on behind it. Talk to you next week, my chickens.

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Okay my chickens, I have a favor to ask you. Now, it might seem funny for me to ask you to do this given that I always teach that we need to be putting ourselves out there and living our lives regardless of what other people think of us. That is true. And also the algorithms have their ways. And so I would love to invite you, if you have gotten value from this podcast, if this podcast has helped you, if it changed your life, to pave that forward and make sure that other people see it.

You don't have to text it to your friends even, you can just go to unfuckyourbrain.com/podcastreview, all one word, it's unfuckyourbrain.com/podcastreview. And we have all of the instructions there for how you can leave a review of the podcast. Leaving reviews is super helpful even when a podcast is really big and popular already, when there are new reviews it helps with the algorithm, it helps bump the podcast up. It helps other people see the podcast and obviously my mission with this podcast is for as many people in the world as possible to hear it.

So I would love for you to do that if you are willing, if you are so inclined. It would be enormously helpful to me. And so if I have been a little or a lot or enormously helpful to you, please take a minute and go to unfuckyourbrain.com/podcastreview, all one word and leave a review and a rating. Give us some stars. Thank you my chickens, I'll talk to you soon.