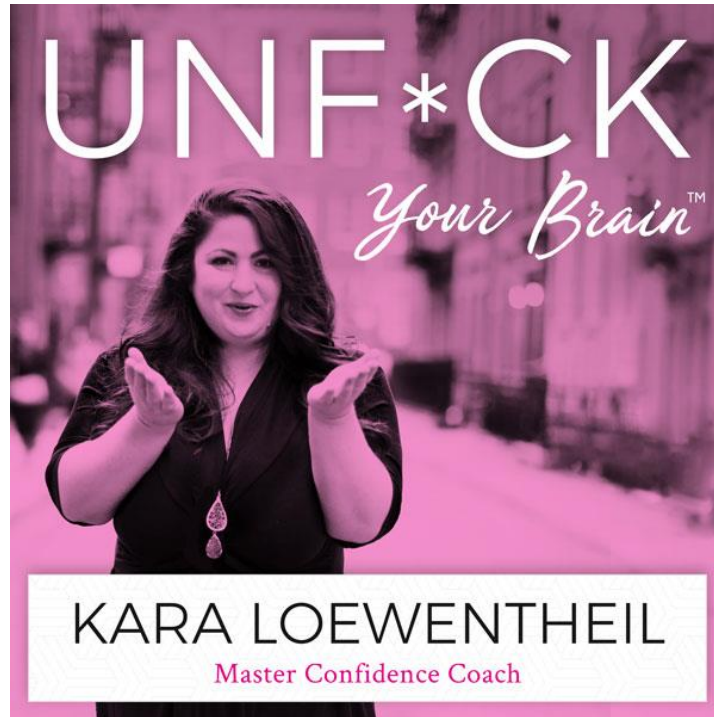


UFYB 295: The Parent Blame Boomerang



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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

Hello, my chickens, how are you? I am very happy to be able to breathe again. I'm recording this during the week that New York City has been kind of covered in a fire smog from the Canadian wildfires, and I had a hard time with my breathing this week. My whole body just felt on edge for over a week. That was such a reminder for me, of how all of our ecosystems are related.

Within my body, I felt like I was on edge. My mood wasn't as good, right? I felt like my nervous system was kind of activated, because I was having a little trouble with my breathing. Then just ecosystem wise, right? You can't just tell yourself that some problem doesn't impact you because it seems far away. There aren't forest fires in New York, usually, but forest fires in Canada are impacting us here, right?

We're all connected, and so are our ecosystems. This is sort of a clunky segue. But it's actually really accurate also that today's episode is kind of about how a certain kind of thought pattern can circulate in unexpected ways through your mental ecosystem, and cause problems that you wouldn't expect.

I think it's also an episode that shows us why non-judgment and compassion for ourselves and for others go hand in hand, and truly can't be separated. It's really wild to me how often I see people online especially, who are claiming to object to someone else, acting unjustly or someone else dehumanizing other people, and all the while they're dehumanizing that person that they are criticizing themselves.

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It's just a really wild feature, of online "left" social discourse. I would say left in quotation marks because what the American left is, and what the global left is, can be very different. And, I say this as a leftist. But we will claim to be for humanity and compassion, but then we will express inhumane and non-compassionate beliefs about people who disagree with us, right?

It's like being an abolitionist who is against prisons, except thinking that anybody who does believe in prisons should go to prison. Right? It doesn't add up. Anyway, this is all related. But let's like bring it back to the brain, and how judgment of other people and demonizing of other people can actually impact negatively on how we're thinking about ourselves.

That's true in general, but I'm going to talk about it more specifically today, in the context of your thoughts about your family. So, one of the things, I think, the advent of traditional talk therapy has done is to encourage everyone to trace most of everything about themselves back to their family of origin and their parenting.

Of course, because patriarchy, originally this was mostly about mothers and how your mother treated you, right? Because psychology, like any institution, was shaped by the patriarchy. So, if there was a problem with your psychology, it was probably from your mother.

I think now we understand it more broadly to be about both your parents or whatever parents you had, whatever your caregivers you had. Not everybody was raised by their parents. We're just talking about parental figures, caregivers, whoever took care of you growing up.

Now, I just want to get it out of the way, I'm not saying that your early childhood experiences don't have a profound and significant influence on your life, right? Including how you were raised or parented by your primary caregivers. Those experiences are absolutely an important part of what shapes your brain, your nervous system, your belief systems.

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There's a lot of evidence about adverse childhood experiences impacting mental health, physical health, down the line. Understanding how the parenting you received may have impacted you or influenced the way you show up can be very illuminating and useful. But causation and blame are very different.

Understanding causation means you can see how your parents, showing up a certain way... Again, parents, caregivers, whoever we're talking about... Showing up a certain way, influenced or impacted you. Blame means that you're giving their past actions power over your current emotional state. Right?

So, understanding is just causation. It's, "Oh, I see how my parents or caregivers acted this way. This is the lesson I learned from that. This is how my nervous system responded to that. These are the thoughts I developed. Now I see how they're showing up in my life now." It doesn't have a positive/negative valence to it.

Blame is inherently negative. It means that you're telling yourself, "However I am now, is bad. There's something wrong with how I am now. It's a problem that I feel the way I feel. It's a problem that I am the way I am. And so, since there's a problem, somebody is to blame for having caused it. That's my caregivers. If they had been different, I wouldn't be this way. If they had been different, I wouldn't have this problem. So, my feelings that I have now, about being who I am or feeling the way I feel, those are negative and bad, and it's their fault that I have them."

It's an important difference. I have to say, as always, you can totally do this if you want to. You have free will. It is not up to me to tell you how to think. If you are in a thought pattern where you are blaming your parents or your caregivers for who you are and how you feel now, and you like the results you're getting with that thought pattern, God bless, knock yourself out, right?

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I think that often, one reason that that can feel helpful, is that we may have grown up blaming ourselves for being a certain way. Either we came up with that idea, society taught us, and sometimes the very caregivers who were taking care of us, in a not helpful way, also told us that whatever was happening was our fault.

So, if you've blamed yourself for being a certain way, it can be helpful to see where it might have come from and see that that responsibility isn't just yours. I think sometimes we swing really far the other way at first especially, and sort of blame everything on what happened to us or what we experienced. And that's also normal.

There's nothing wrong with any of this. You always get to decide what to think. I am not telling you that it is better to not blame anybody in your life for anything, you get to decide. You get to look at how that thought pattern is making you feel, how it is making you act, what results and returns are you creating in your life, how are you showing up in your own life with that thought pattern, and you get to decide if you want to change it or not.

But I think that we don't always see how these thought patterns can create problems in unexpected areas. That's what I really want to talk about today. Because there are a few problems with blaming your parents for their parenting mistakes and kind of demonizing that, and I don't think that we're always aware of them.

And so, blaming your parents for things that you don't like about yourself, find challenging, or for any suffering you're experiencing, really holding on to resentment and blame about that, can have unintended consequences. And in order to make an informed and empowered decision about how you want to think, you need to understand what all the potential consequences are.

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The first is simply, that when we're in a blaming state, I think we run the risk of getting stuck in it. Right? Blame can turn into rumination when we feel helpless to change. If you believe someone caused a problem, but you believe you can fix the problem, you're not likely to get trapped in passivity and rumination.

You're like, "Okay, well, that car crashed into my mailbox and knocked it over. But I can get another mailbox. I can fix this mailbox. It's annoying. It's not derailing my life." Because you believe you can fix the problem. It's not just about the scope of the problem. Obviously, a mailbox is not a huge problem. But it's about how you think about it, right? And whether you believe you can do something about it.

But if you believe someone caused a problem, and you believe that you can't solve it, or that you're suffering because of it, and you can't relieve your own suffering, then it's much easier to kind of get emotionally trapped. I've talked about this more in depth in other episodes, just in terms of what happens when we blame other people for how we feel.

How that starts out feeling kind of empowering because we're not blaming ourselves, but then it becomes disempowering in its own way, because then we feel helpless. But what I want to talk about now is this problem, I think, is less obvious. That is how blaming your caregivers or parents can boomerang in your own life.

I think it can sort of unexpectedly ricochet back at you, both generally in your personality, but also, especially, when it comes to parenting. But it happens whether you're a parent or not. So, I'm going to talk about the parenting element first. But if you're not a parent, keep listening. Because at the end, I'm also going to talk about how this impacts you, even if you're not a parent.

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So, here's the problem, whether your parents were just your biological parents or they also raised you, and especially if both, you have been unavoidably influenced by them. That means that there are parts of you that are like your parents. Whether for genetic reasons or from nature or nurture, either way, parts of you are like parts of them.

Which means that if you have demonized one or both of them, you have accidentally demonized parts of yourself as well. Right? And we can use a really simple physical trait example. If you tell yourself that you hate the color of your parents hair, but then you have that same hair color, now you've demonized part of yourself, right?

If you tell yourself that you hate a personality trait of your parent, that you either then inherited or developed, nature-nurture, now you have been subconsciously telling yourself to hate this thing about yourself. We know how it works out for your mental and emotional health when you demonize and hate yourself. It's not a great return.

I see this happening with parents... As I said, I'm going to talk about parents first, and then everyone and non-parents... All the time. Someone will have some complaints about how they were raised, which is perfectly normal. No matter what kind of parenting you do, you're not going to do it perfectly.

Some people's parents and caregivers, obviously, you did it more imperfectly than others; there's a range. But even if you had the best parents in the world, they're not going to have done it perfectly. And it's completely normal that as you grow up you start to differentiate from your parents.

That's a normal psychological process that needs to happen. You individuate. You become your own person. And you kind of, by definition, define yourself in opposition to them. Especially when you're a teenager,

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and you're trying to become your own person, right? Most everybody has some complaint about how they were parented. Again, it's completely normal.

So, as you grow up and you think about having kids, people who see this pattern that I see, this patterning, will have told themselves over and over, that they want to do it differently. They don't want to parent the way their parents did. And so, it becomes really important to them to do it differently.

Being a different kind of parent than the one they had, becomes part of their identity as a parent. So, they start to build their whole identity and self-worth as a parent around being different than the parent that they had. If their parent, let's say, was not really paying attention to them, was working all the time, was not involved in the family life, they may build an identity around being a really involved parent.

“I want to do differently. I'm going to be really involved. I'm going to know everything that's going on with my kid. I'm going to stay home with them. I'm going to be with them all the time. That's what a good parent would do. I felt lonely. I felt neglected. I felt like my parents didn't care. I don't want my kids to feel that way. So, I'm going to do the opposite.”

This is not me and my story, right? I'm just saying this is an example of this thought pattern. But here's the problem with this. The way you are parented impacted you. It's impossible for it not to have impacted you. And annoyingly, it impacts you in ways you may not even be conscious of. And so, because you developed these beliefs before you were aware of how your brain worked, you were likely really focused on the actions your parents took, right?

So, when you're growing up, and your caregivers or parents are influencing you, it's happening on a lot of levels. The most obvious, you're seeing the

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actions they take, and you're thinking about them. But you're being influenced on a subconscious level, too.

You're just learning so much subconsciously from your parents about what to think about baseball, what to think about money, when to eat, what to eat, how much to eat, how to think about your body, how to interact with other people, and how to have relationships. Literally, so much of your experiencing, your socialization, comes from your immediate family, right? The people are taking care of you.

You're picking up implicitly all the ways that they are. How they handle stress. How they handle emotions. How they communicate all of that, right? But when you don't know about coaching, and you're thinking about how you were raised, and you have objections, and you want to do it differently, you're really focused on the actions your parents took.

And so, you can sometimes do a pretty good job of making sure that you don't take the same actions that your parents took, maybe. Like, if your parent never came near baseball games, and then you just make sure that you go to all your kids baseball games, you are taking a different action. But we know that there's more to how we operate and how we communicate and how we impact the world than specific actions.

So, let me give you another example. Let's say that your parents yelled a lot and you've been really committed to not yelling at your kids. You remember how it felt to be yelled at. You don't want to yell, and you don't yell. You have managed to restrain yourself from yelling. No matter how upset and dysregulated you feel, you don't yell. And so, you may have a lot of identity and sort of self-worth as a parent wrapped up in that.

You may also overcorrect in ways that impact your parenting that you will miss. So, for instance, let's stick with the yelling example. Maybe you felt, growing up, like you could never relax. Because your parent was what you

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would have called sort of stressed out, and you were always afraid they'll yell at you. So, maybe it's really important that your kids feel comfortable.

And so, what you do, is you actually never have any rules or any boundaries because you're just trying to overcorrect. You just want to be the opposite of yelling. You just want them to feel relaxed and have fun all the time. Which is actually not a good strategy. It turns you into an overly permissive parent. And it's actually not good for your kids, because kids do need some structure. Right?

But you can't see that, because you're just measuring your parenting by 'do I yell and make my kids afraid of me? If my kids aren't afraid of me, and I'm not yelling, that's the most important thing.' Right? And so, you're not having a balanced approach to parenting.

Or you may find that you grew up with this belief, and told yourself you'd never want to yell at your kids, and now you actually can't stop yourself and you do yell even though you don't want to. But you're not really able to investigate the yelling, you're not able to change the behavior, because you have so much shame around the yelling. Because you spent so many years thinking that your parent was a bad parent because they yelled, and blaming your unhappiness on that parenting.

So now, when you yell at your kid, that's so painful for you. You make that mean that you're going to screw your kids up, that you're a bad parent, and that you're the person you never want it to be. So, you create all this shame.

We know that that shame makes it impossible to gain awareness and to grow. Shame makes us want to move on as quickly as possible from the behavior. We just vow that we'll never do it again, so we can distance ourselves from it, right?

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We're just like, we feel shame, and we're like, "Okay, I'm never going to yell again." And then, we feel a little bit better, because we're pretending we're going to be this person who will never yell again. But we haven't actually figured out what thought and feeling is creating that action. So of course, we do yell again, the very next time we get upset.

But we have to think about: Why did your parent yell in the first place? Because they were emotionally dysregulated. They were upset. They didn't know how to cope with their emotions without yelling. And if you just focus on the action of yelling, you may be successfully not yelling. But you may be getting completely emotionally dysregulated and expressing it in some other kind of way.

You won't have awareness of that, because you were just focused on the yelling. You still absorbed what you were being taught implicitly. So, let's say, maybe your parents' yelling trigger was when they felt disrespected.

You've learned not to yell, but you still absorbed this belief that children should respect you. That XYZ kind of actions show that a child is not respecting you. That being upset when a child doesn't respect you is natural and important. And you should communicate that to the child and teach them to respect you, right?

So, you may actually have absorbed, fundamentally, the whole thought and feeling pattern around respect, or whatever the thing was in your family, right? It's always going to be different. But you may have actually just absorbed, without thinking about it, the premise, the beliefs, the emotional triggers, and reactions. And you're not aware of any of that, because you were just focused on, "I'm not going to yell. Yelling is what makes a parent bad. I'm not going to yell. I want to be a good parent. That's that."

You may actually be acting out your emotional dysregulation in other ways, without even realizing it. Maybe you don't yell, maybe you get really silent.

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Maybe you don't raise your voice, but you speak in a really harsh tone. Maybe you tried to suppress your stress and shove it down, but everybody can still totally tell that you're really stressed. Maybe you say something that's sort of mean or cutting, but in a very calm tone; you don't even realize that's what you're doing. Right?

So, you may actually still be repeating some of the patterns that you didn't want to replicate in your parenting. Because you're so focused on just not acting in this specific way that you've decided was bad. Your whole identity as a parent just rests on not being like that parent. Which to you, means not doing the thing they did. And that means that you may miss things that impact your parenting, right?

And so, you may be sort of fulfilling the specific goal you had, but not really accomplishing the underlying purpose. The reason that you were upset, yeah, maybe it was that your parent yelled. But what it really was about was feeling scared as a kid. That your parent was emotionally dysregulated and not managing their emotions.

You may not be yelling, but if you are not paying attention to your actual emotional state and you're emotionally dysregulated, and just sort of expressing that or taking that out on your kid in a different non-yelling way, your child still probably having a similar experience that you are having.

This is not a criticism, of course. But this is the whole point. It's to bring more awareness and broaden the frame. When you have demonized a parent, and really focused on kinds of behavior that you've decided are bad and you have to be different from, then you're not able to be curious about your own behavior or bring awareness to it because you're just really fixated on not doing a certain thing.

And you are not going to be curious or willing at looking at what you may still be replicating from your childhood, because you've staked your identity

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on being different. So, this kind of shows you how identifying and basing your self-worth as a parent, on being different from how you were raised, can have these unintended consequences.

If you do end up acting in that same way, it keeps you from bringing curiosity and awareness to why that's happening and to change it. And even if you are able to produce a different behavior, if you aren't aware of all the thoughts and feelings behind it, then it's going to keep you from seeing how you may still actually be replicating the parenting that you got, in a different way. Or how you may be overcorrecting and parenting at a different extreme. That's also not helpful.

So, that's how it impacts your parenting, in terms of your awareness, of how you parent, and your ability to change it. And there's one more way it comes up in parenting. And then, I'm going to talk about non-parents as well.

Parents are already over encouraged in our society to take too much responsibility for their children's emotions. And especially, I think, in America at least... the West maybe more broadly, but certainly America... To really want their children to be happy. There's this, 'happiness is the goal of life' theory, right?

We talk a lot on the podcast about why this is not a useful goal for anyone, to be happy all the time. Happiness is nice. Lots of positive emotions are nice, and they're a part of life, along with negative emotions. And trying to manage your whole life to only have one of the zillions of human emotions is not feasible or wise.

I see people even accept this for themselves when they've come to coaching, but not for their kids. They still think their kids need to be happy. And if their kid isn't happy, then they've failed as a parent. Here's the rub, if you blame your parents for all of your problems and your unhappiness,

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you're going to take way too much responsibility for your child's life experience and emotions.

If you've told yourself that parents are responsible for everything about their children's happiness or unhappiness, because you've been blaming your parents for how you feel all the time, then you're going to blame yourself for how your kid feels all the time.

That is either going to make you feel ashamed and paralyzed when they have the normal human experience of some positive and some negative emotion. Or it's going to make you way too overinvolved in their life, constantly trying to control it, and trying to prevent them from having negative emotions. Or trying to prevent anything that you think is bad from happening to them.

Because it's so important to you that they be happy, so that you can feel like you're a good parent. It's going to make you constantly overanalyzing your parenting. Trying to predict if what you're doing is going to screw up your kids. The more you blame your parents for your own unhappiness or problems, the more you'll blame yourself for your kids unhappiness or problems. Maybe consciously, maybe subconsciously, but that is what is going to happen for the vast majority of your brains.

But conversely, the more you can take ownership of your own current day reality, the less you will be emotionally over enmeshed in your kid's experience. That does not mean that you criticize yourself as a child for how you felt back then. Your brain is not fully developed when you're a child. Your experience is very impacted by your caregivers. You don't have full logical awareness, or full emotional regulation.

As an adult, though, it's your responsibility to try to work with change, accept or heal whatever you experienced, and whatever patterns arose from that. And you get to decide what to think about that whole process.

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But when you're deciding what to think, it's important to understand the consequences of those thought patterns that you're choosing. It's very hard to blame your parents for your emotions, and anything negative you think is wrong with your life, without then blaming yourself for your kid's emotions and anything negative in their lives, too.

It's like, you can't have one without the other. And the irony, of course, is that I think it makes it harder to show up as the parent you want to be when you do this.

My goal in parenting is to be emotionally regulated as much as I can be. It's completely normal to get dysregulated sometimes, to get upset, even to yell sometimes, whatever it is. I'm not much of a yeller. But I will occasionally do the, "I need you to go downstairs right now, because I need a minute."

It's not about perfection. But my goal is to try to manage my own mind and emotions and regulate myself, so that I can show up with compassion and clarity in how I want to parent. If I am wracked by guilt and shame and anxiety about doing it all wrong and fucking my kids up for life and feeling bad about anything negative they ever experience, because I've based my worth as a parent on managing their emotional experience, then I am not able to show up regulated or calm, right?

Taking responsibility for everything your child feels or experiences and blaming yourself for all of it, actually does not let you parent from a clean place. Right? It makes it much harder to be the parent you want to be, because it makes you emotionally stressed out all the time.

Okay, so hopefully, if you're a parent, you are convinced now that the way that you think about how you were parented is going to show up in your own parenting. And that if you demonize your parent or caregiver, it's going to be very hard for you to not demonize yourself when you see similarities

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coming up either in your actions, your thoughts, your belief systems, the ways that you parent, even just how you talk. Right? All of that.

So, what about you non-parents? This is still relevant to you, as well, even if you're not parenting and never plan to parent. Because you also were unavoidably impacted by the people who raised you. You may have consciously rejected certain things about your parents, or consciously embrace certain things about your parents. But it's impossible to escape being shaped by them.

And at least for me, as I've gotten older, I start to see more of the similarities because I get closer to the ages that my parents were at the time that I was able to form memories about them. So, if your parents were 45 when you were 16, you remember them from then. You may not remember what they were like when you were five, but you remember what they were like when you were 16.

So, for me, as I get to my 40s, I start to see more similarities between me now and how they were at the same age, because I'm old enough to remember them at that age. And if you have demonized one of your parents or caregivers, that means you've unavoidably demonized parts of yourself.

There are patterns you learn from them, no matter what. It might be ways of speaking. It might be your eating habits. It could be your music preferences, beliefs about the world, biological similarities; nature or nurture, you've inherited some of them. And if you've demonized them, you'll have a hard time accepting yourself when you see those similarities.

The thing is your brain doesn't really cabinet. So, even if the thing that you really may resent about a parent, but that has kind of dominated your beliefs about them and your emotional relationship to them, it will impact you. Even if the things that you recognize in yourself are not related to that.

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So, let's say... I'm just using the yelling example for most of this episode. Let's say your parent yelled at you, and you have really sort of demonized them for that. You blame a lot of your adult emotional experiences on how you were parented and that they yelled, and it's become very important to you to not yell.

You've become a nonviolent communication trainer for your whole life's work; whatever it is. Then you notice that your face is starting to look like that parent as you get older. Or you hear yourself saying, like a saying they always used to say. These things are totally unrelated to the yelling, but your brain hasn't cabineted in that way. Your brain hasn't separated them that way.

So, if you have spent all this time emotionally rejecting that parent and demonizing them. If you start to see ways that you resemble them, consciously or unconsciously. Even if they've nothing to do with the behavior that drove the anger at the parent, or drove the demonization. Even if it's totally unrelated to that specific behavior or characteristic they had that you didn't like.

If you have sort of thrown the baby out with the bathwater, which is what your brain does when it decides to demonize someone, then you're going to have a hard time accepting or loving those aspects of yourself. You're going to be kind of primed to reject yourself. If you have demonized them, you'll have a very hard time accepting yourself when you see those similarities.

And I think that can be an issue, for the same reason I described above. If you notice something about yourself, similar to a parent you've demonized, and you want to change it, it's going to be hard for you to accept it and get curious about it. Because you've identified yourself with not being that way, and you see being that way as a bad thing.

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Again, it doesn't have to be the thing in question. So, you might have complaints about things one through five, about your parent. And the thing you notice about yourself is thing six. It's not something you specifically didn't like about them, but it's something that is recognizably similar to them.

If you've demonized them overall, then your brain is going to react in the same way, and you're going to be rejecting yourself just because you have some similarities to this person, that your brain has conditioned itself to reject. So, these are all different manifestations of the same underlying problem.

And that means that they have the same underlying solution. As always, it is one, self-compassion. Which, two, usually leads to more compassion for other people. In order to take responsibility for the parts of your experience you can control, you have to have self-compassion.

We *think* it's the other way around. That we can beat ourselves up into being more responsible and fixing the problem. And then after that, we can afford to be nice to ourselves.

But it's the other way around. We have to cultivate self-compassion first. And then, we will be brave enough, and non-activated enough, to bring more awareness to the thought-feeling-behavior loop that we are in. So, you start with a self-compassion of understanding that it's impossible to not be impacted and shaped by your parenting and the caregivers you had, and your genetics. None of that's destiny, but it does impact you.

Now, that self-compassion may or may not lead to you having more compassion for your parent or caregiver, that's up to you. You don't have to. But once you have some self-compassion, at least you'll be able to actually look at the behavior and see if you want to change it.

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Sometimes you will. Sometimes you'll realize that, actually, it would be more useful to change your thoughts about your parent. Because if you've painted with a broad brush, and you're now judging completely harmless or even positive things about you, just because they remind you of that parent you may realize that it makes more sense, it's easier, it's more effective, to change your thoughts about the parent rather than trying to change the thing.

And when that happens, when you're sort of painting with that broad of a brush, you're not exercising discernment. You're not exercising that self-compassion. So, it is always up to you. But curiosity and self-compassion are always the first step.

This is one of the things that we work on all the time in The Clutch. Because curiosity and self-compassion are the foundational ingredients for any kind of change. You cannot change yourself without them. So, if this is something you want to work on, then you want to get on the waitlist for The Clutch. So, that the next time we open for new members, you are on that list.

We are opening again later this summer. The Clutch is my feminist coaching community. And it's where you learn how to take everything I teach on the podcast, and apply it in a condensed, organized, effective manner so that you don't have to swim through 300 podcast episodes yourself trying to put it all together.

You can come and learn it in a structured, effective way that teaches you exactly how to coach yourself. And then, teaches you how to work through every area of your life, with specific training, on every challenge you may have. So, get on the wait-list, so that you find out the next time we open, because we have a lot of people who want to join, and you want to make sure that you find out right away.

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Text or email to +1-347-934-8861. There's no code word. You just text your email address and we'll send you the link. Or go to UnfuckYourBrain.com/Clutch. Come get on the wait-list, and we will let you know as soon as we are open again, so you can finally get started on changing your thoughts for good.