

UFYB 11: Stress Isn't Necessary



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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 fully January now, it is 2018. We're all kind of coming off that holiday high or holiday low and getting back into the groove of things.

So, today, I want to talk about stress. When you are off work in particular and kind of out of your normal life, you may have emotional stress from dealing with family, or the holidays, but you're kind of out of your daily grind. Then, when you get back to the daily grind, that kind of daily grind stress starts to come up again. So, today, I want to talk to you a little bit about what stress is and why it isn't necessary.

So, if I asked you right now, if stress is necessary, you'd probably say no. And, in fact, you'd say that you are dying to get rid of yours. All of my clients sign up with me because they want to be less stressed in one way or another, and one area of their life or another. But when it comes down to it and we start looking at their thoughts, it turns out that they do subconsciously think that stress is serving them.

I'm seeing this right now with my Unfuck Your Brain students. We just sort of got started in the last couple of weeks. And we've been working on noticing when they're judging themselves. And what many of them are discovering is that they have been believing that shame, and guilt, and stress are actually positive and necessary. So, today, I'm going to show you the ways in which you may secretly believe that stress is necessary and a good thing. And I'm going to teach you why it absolutely is not.

So, for those of you who are newer to the podcast, let's review what stress is first and what creates that. You have to understand what stress is before you understand why it's counterproductive. So, stress is a set of physical sensations in your body that are caused by hormonal and physiological changes set off by your brain, primarily, the release of adrenaline and cortisol into your bloodstream. The brain releases adrenaline and cortisol when it thinks that it is perceiving a threat. When your brain thinks that it sees a threat, that's when it releases them.

These hormones actually produce physical effects in your body. And those effects are helpful if you are actually out running something that is trying to eat you. Your heart rate increases to pump more blood, your muscles contract to run faster. You don't need all the science here, but what you want to understand is that the physical sensation of stress is an evolutionary adaptation. It was helpful when the main causes of stress were things that want to eat you, and it actually helped you get away.

It is no longer very helpful now that the main causes of stress are things like work emails and ex-boyfriends. And I'm not saying that to make light of the experiences you find stressful. It's really quite the opposite. The reason that these things like work emails and ex-boyfriends, or ex-girlfriends, or ex-partners of any gender feel like matters of life and death, is that your brain is responding to them using a system that evolved to handle literally life and death situations.

Think about the smoke alarm in your kitchen. It's designed to tell you when a fire is going to kill you. It's actually quite important that it work to do that. Unfortunately, because it's over-sensitive, it often tells you that you have a roast chicken in the oven. Now, you know the difference so you respond differently, but your smoke alarm does not know the difference. And it only has one setting, which is ear piecing shriek. Same thing with your brain. So, that is what stress is and why it used to be necessary. It used to actually make us run away from things that would eat us.

Remember, you share this part of your brain with basically everything that has evolved since the first fish crawled out of the swamp. This is not the human specific prefrontal cortex of your brain that evolved last and has rational thought. This is the primitive limbic system of your brain that controls

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stress arousal. If you don't manage it with the more evolved parts of your brain, which most of us don't because we never learned to.

So, that all sounds ridiculous, right? Your brain is reacting to emails and text messages like they're going to eat you. And, of course, you would think, "Yeah, I want to get rid of that. That's dumb." So, why do I think you may still think it's necessary? I want you to think about whether you believe any of these thoughts, if I'm not stressed out, I won't get my work done. If I'm not stressed out, I won't do a good job. If I weren't stressed out, I would just sit on the couch all day. If I'm not feeling bad about my body, I won't eat well or go to the gym. If I accept my body, I'll never work out or watch what I eat. If I didn't feel guilty that would mean I was a bad person. If I didn't feel bad that would mean I was selfish. If any of those sound true to you, if you've said any of those things to yourself, you are believing that stress is necessary and that it's useful.

This is a really common idea in our culture, the negative emotions like stress, and anxiety, and guilt, and shame will produce positive action. That is 100% wrong. Here's why, when human beings are stressed they want comfort. When they are anxious, they want to distract and avoid. Think about it, if something's chasing you to eat you what do you want to do? You want to outrun it, get away from it, or you want to hide from it. Those are your two options. When humans feel shame, guilt, we want to hide, we want to be alone. Humans do not have positive responses to negative emotions.

Let's really break it down. When you're anxious about something at work, do you tackle it right away, and work quickly and efficiently on it? No, fuck no. You procrastinate, you avoid you distract, you get on Facebook, you get a snack, you stare at the wall. And, eventually, when the deadline gets close enough to terrify you, then you push through the anxiety to get it done. The anxiety never helped you along the way. It just delayed your progress and created resistance.

Let's take another example, say you're guilted yourself for having eaten dessert and you're feeling guilty and ashamed. If you're someone who eats to deal with emotions, what happens when you guilt yourself? Now, if your brain said, "Oh, when I go myself I go to the gym." I want you to go back and start this podcast from the beginning. When you feel bad about yourself, you want comfort. And that's likely to be eating even more because you associate food with comfort. And because you want to literally create physical feelings and sensations in your body through food to distract yourself from the emotional distress that you're creating by shaming yourself.

Yet, so many of my clients are high achieving, ambitious women and they believe that they have been fueled by their anxiety, insecurity and fear. They have always experienced these things and they have sought accomplishments to try to quell those feelings. So, they begin to associate the accomplishments with the feelings. They had the feelings and they went after brass rings to make themselves feel better. And then, they start to associate those two things together. But correlation is not causation.

You did not achieve what you have achieved because you are creating anxiety, insecurity, guilt, and shame for yourself. You achieved what you achieved, despite those feelings, or you white knuckle through them for years. You tried to forcibly drive through all that anxiety, and insecurity, and guilt and shame. And you've been doing that for years or decades.

If you're listening to this podcast that probably means you are exhausted, you're tired of white knuckling. But you may consciously or subconsciously fear that without those negative emotions, you won't keep moving. But that's not true. Without the fear, and anxiety and insecurity it is possible that there are some things in your life that you might stop caring about so much. But here's the thing, anything you stop caring about when you're only driven by anxiety and guilt isn't something you cared that much about anyway.

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Give yourself some credit. Is it really likely that someone with your interests, and passions, and desires, and goals and hopes and dreams is going to just sit on the couch for the rest of her life if she isn't constantly driving herself like a sadistic animal trainer? No. Yeah, once you learn how to stop being cruel to yourself, you may see an uptick in lazy Sundays for a little while. And that's a good thing. First of all, lazy Sundays are awesome. But secondly, it's normal that when you first stop beating yourself up, you notice that you're a little less driven. It's like when people practice intuitive eating. When you stop dieting, you have to go through a period of allowance in eating whatever you want in order to learn how to eat intuitively again. You have to prove to your brain that you're not going to restrict or be mean to yourself before your brain will let you sort of reach a natural equilibrium.

When you've been berating yourself for a long time, your brain needs a little time to recover. So yes, if you stop shaming yourself into doing a whole ton of shit you don't want to do it is possible that you don't notice you're doing a few less of those things because you didn't want to do them in the first place. Soon enough though, you'll find that you're developing intrinsic motivation, that's what you open up the space for. You open up the space to have thoughts and feelings that produce positive action in ways that feel good. And, ironically enough, that's usually the thing you were yelling at yourself about not having. You were calling yourself lazy for not having intrinsic motivation and only being able to do things when you berate yourself. But that's just cause you condition yourself to work that way, or you never given yourself a chance to work the other way.

I know this is a big jump for some of you and that is okay. It was a big jump for me. I definitely associated all of my accomplishments with anxiety, and fear and insecurity. But what I really learned in my own process was that there were some things I could achieve being anxious and insecure. I achieved a lot in the legal career by being anxious and insecure. When I started to change my thoughts, I found I could achieve even more in my legal career. And when I switched to being a coach, I could never have created this business being driven by anxiety, and fear, and insecurity, and shame and guilt. There's no way. There are just some things that you cannot produce from those feelings. And one of those is a thriving business.

So, I have really seen in my own life, the ways in which how having a lot of achievements, and being very accomplished, and getting all these prestigious things, and being driven by fear and anxiety definitely led me to believe that they were connected causally, that I needed one to have the other. And what I found when I changed those thoughts and let go of that driving myself with that self criticism, and shame, and fear was that my priorities did change a little bit, but in an amazing way. And I believe I'm 100 times more ambitious now in the work I do now as a coach than I ever was as a lawyer. Releasing that fear and that anxiety didn't make me not ambitious. It didn't make me not want to achieve. It didn't make me not want accomplish. Removing it made me want to create, and commune, and create, and teach, and grow my own business and build this whole new, big, scary, amazing thing that I have created for myself.

So, you're not all going to get there in the course of this podcast, that's totally fine. Here's the question I want you to start with, what would my life be like if I were not driven by anxiety, fear, insecurity, shame or guilt? If I were not driven by negative emotion, what would my life be like? What emotions would I want to have instead? And what would I create in my life if those emotions are what drove my actions? Or we talk all the time on the podcast about how your thoughts create your feelings, create your actions. What kind of feelings would you want to have instead? And how would you act?

What if you felt motivated? What if you felt committed? What if you felt brave? What if you felt excited? What if you felt able? What if you felt worthy? How do you think you would act? What would you create in your life? Remember, you get to decide how to think, feel, and act in your life. If you want

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to create something ambitious and amazing, you can do that. What I'm here to tell you is that you don't have to use negative feelings as the fuel to do that.

And, in fact, if you keep with the negative feelings, if you try to drive yourself with those you're much less likely to achieve what you want. And you are 100% less likely to enjoy the process, or even be able to enjoy the result. When you are driven by anxiety, and insecurity, and fear and shame, you know what you get? You get more of those things. So, even when you white knuckle through and you achieve something, you don't even get to enjoy it because the thing doesn't create the emotions, your thoughts do. When you change your thoughts to create feelings of excitement, motivation, dedication, commitment, enthusiasm, drive or whatever those feelings are you want to create, those positive feelings you produce and create more, and you actually get to enjoy it and the process because all along you're creating positive emotion.

So, mull on that this week, my chickens. And I will talk to you soon.

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