

## UFYB 302: How to Enjoy Your Vacation No Matter What



### **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 finally going on vacation. I am so excited. The gentleman consort and I are going to Scotland and this is relevant to today. I'm not just updating you on my life. So we'll finally be doing something that I have wanted to do for years, which is to take a Belmond train. So Belmond is a hotel group or company or whatever and they have refurbished several vintage trains and they've made them kind of fancy like train travel used to be.

And I've been sort of looking at their European trips for years. They have a five night journey they do once a year from Istanbul to Paris, that is to die for. That's my, I don't know, if I hit some enormous milestone, that's the trip I'm going to do. But anyway, this year we were trying to figure out what to do for our kind of time we have to go away given those of you who are now getting custody schedules and things like that, know sometimes you have just a certain amount of time you can go somewhere and we can't really figure out we want to do.

And then I realized that I have never been to Scotland, I always wanted to go. And there is a Belmond Train in Scotland called the Royal Scotsman that had a three night journey that actually had availability. They're almost always all sold out. So we are going to do that train trip and then we're going to also go see the Highlands, we're going to Edinburgh, etc. So something came up as we were planning the trip that I realized was actually a great podcast topic and something we should talk about.

So there can be so much pressure on vacations to be so amazing. I think we look forward to them and we want them to create all these emotions for us. And if you're like me, you also care a lot about aesthetics and wanting to go someplace really beautiful. So for me, one of the best parts of

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vacation is staying in a beautiful place, having a beautiful view, just kind of surrounding myself, it's funny because I'm not a visual thinker at all. But I'm very kind of attuned to and care about my visual environment a lot and the style and the aesthetics of it.

And so last night I was showing gentleman consort the photos of the train. And we started kind of Googling because obviously the hotel website has the most fabulous photos of the train website, the hotel company. Anyway, those are the professional photos, of course, but I was trying to show him some stuff about the train. And so we started Googling and some amateur photos came up, just snapshots that people have taken with a flash or no flash, in the dark or whatever.

If you've ever spent any time on TripAdvisor, you know that most people are really terrible photographers. And even a nice place can look horrible when people take bad pictures of it. So we were doing that and I saw these photographs of the train that did not look amazing. The interior did not look the way that it looks on the website. It looked kind of dowdy or dated. It didn't look like my style. It didn't look luxurious.

And I felt my heart sink because all of a sudden I imagined myself getting on the train and just thinking that everything looked shabby and ugly and feeling so disappointed and trapped. Because, once you're on this train, it's not that easy to just jump off and go your own way. And on a train trip, you're really spending a lot of time on the train. It's a three day train tour. You do get off to do stuff, but a lot of it you're just on the train looking at the scenery.

So I had this sort of visceral moment of being like, oh, God, what if I hate it and then I'm so unhappy and I'm so bummed out that I spent all this money and blah, blah, blah? But, of course, 10 seconds later I was like, oh, this is such a perfect opportunity for self-coaching. And so I reminded myself that if that happens, all it means is that I have thought and a feeling. I am

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somebody who has had to do a lot of self-coaching around disappointment. That is not something that I grew up knowing how to tolerate very well.

And so disappointment with, if people, when I was doing dating, I did a lot of coaching on allowing myself to feel disappointed without making that mean something, because it's completely inevitable in a romantic relationship, any kind of relationship, especially early on, that you're going to feel disappointment, your brain is going to create that for you. And that used to be a game ender for me. And so I've coached myself a lot on disappointment.

I also have had lots of times before thought work that I would go on vacation or I would, whatever, go to a hotel, rent an Airbnb, go someplace and then it wouldn't look the way that I thought it was going to. And I have a lot of sensory sensitivities and so my brain's initial reaction to a place if it decides it doesn't look nice or it smells weird or it feels weird, I really have to coach myself. So I have some practice with this and so here's what I did.

I thought about how so many people have gone on this trip and absolutely loved it. Of course I researched it before I booked it. And so many people have found the decor charming and wonderful. And what that means is that if I get there and I decide I hate it, the only difference is what I'm thinking about it. And that's okay, there's no moral requirement to like the Royal Scotsman train. It's okay for somebody to hate it or for me to hate it, but I paid quite a bit of money for this trip.

I work pretty hard in my business and I'm excited about a vacation, so I want to enjoy it. I don't want to hate it. I want to enjoy it. I want to think it's amazing and charming and delightful. So if I decide to just leave my reaction up to my unmanaged mind, if I just say to myself, "Well, I hope I don't hate it." And then I go on the trip and just see what happens. I'm running a pretty good risk of ruining my own vacation for myself for no reason.

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Because we're not talking about staying in a hostel where I don't feel safe, that's something that I would probably decide to change my circumstance. We're talking about whether or not I'm going to fixate on what the decor looks like in a train and if it's different than I imagined, I feel bummed out about it. And this is a little bit of a superficial example, but it's actually not that superficial to me, because of what I value about my vacations and how much I care about having kind of aesthetically exciting experiences.

And I'm going to kind of abstract this for you at the end and teach you how you handle this even when it's not aesthetic at all, something more kind of significant goes wrong. But I see this kind of ruining of our own time so much, I coach on it a lot.

I actually have very vivid memories of one time this happened to my family where we all flew down to Florida for my grandfather's birthday and that was always an adventure because it was always Valentine's Day and Presidents Day weekend so the flights were super expensive anyway. You couldn't spend Valentine's Day with your partner that weekend. It's a three day weekend, you had to use it on this family thing.

It would always snow back when it snowed more before global warming kicked in as much as it has. It hasn't snowed in New York for two winters now, but used to and things would get canceled. The whole thing was like a shit show every year. So we all make it down there, we go out for the birthday dinner and the service is slow. And I remember some of the people at the dinner started to get really agitated about the service being slow, stressing out about it and talking to each other about it and chiding the wait staff about it.

And I just remember thinking, why are we in a rush? Why are you ruining this for yourself? We all flew down here from all over the country, literally just to be together at this dinner. Why are we trying to rush through it, where are we going? Who cares if the service is slow? The whole point was for us to be together in this room? Why do we need to get through it

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faster? So I am sure that you have also experienced similar things, that may not be that exact one obviously.

But that experience of watching yourself or someone else kind of ruin their own time by fixating on something that really doesn't matter in the scheme of things. So for me and the Royal Scotsman, I decided ahead of time that I'm going to love it. I decided ahead of time that I'm going to be enchanted by being on a fancy train, that I'm going to feel relaxed and luxurious, reading in my little train bed, looking out the window, that I'm going to love having all that downtime with the gentleman consort.

I even as we were Googling last night, I was like, "Oh, I don't think I realized that I basically was signing up for a group travel tour." Which is not something I would normally do because I don't like to talk to strangers normally. You guys are not strangers, but in person in real life I'm not the person who you put in a train car and then I talk to everybody, that's my partner.

But as we were looking through the pictures and reading stuff last night, I was like, "Oh, I don't know how I kind of missed that that's what I've done. I have signed up for a group travel tour, it's just on a train." Anyway, so I decided I was going to enjoy meeting strangers on the train. And if I can decide that, then I want to recommend that you decide ahead of time what kind of vacation you're going to have if you have time off coming up. Don't let your unmanaged mind be in charge of this.

And I think that we can break this down into two different kinds of threats to our vacation time from our brain. And one of those are predictable brain reactions or predictable circumstances, really, and the others are unpredictable ones. So a predictable one is something where you know probably the circumstance is going to happen and you know your pattern and probably how your brain's going to react. So maybe you always get stressed out when your kids fight on the plane or your baby cries on the plane or your kids are bickering in public or one of them has a meltdown.

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Or maybe you know, you've already been through this before that you want your partner to gaze at you romantically at a beach dinner, but they have a tendency to get day drunk and go to bed early. Or maybe you know you tend to get irritated every family vacation because your uncle's always complaining that there's not enough golf and there's nothing to do and you think golf is stupid, whatever it is, whatever your brain reaction is.

For this kind of thing you've just got to plan ahead of time. So this was more of the situation with my train tour. I was like, I know that I tend to have this initial swell of disappointment sometimes when I arrive somewhere on vacation because it's not exactly how I thought it was going to be and I just need to plan for that. It's okay if these thoughts and feelings come up. I'm not trying to force my brain ahead of time never to feel disappointment, you can't do that and it's stressful to try.

So my thought isn't, well, I'm going to love it and that means that if I feel disappointed at all, it's not working and I did it wrong. That's not what I'm going into this with. I'm going into this with, I know I might feel disappointed for a minute, but I'm going to go in expecting to love it overall. And if that emotion comes up, I'm going to accept it as no big deal. I'm going to be like, "I know brain, you're often disappointed, probably because I can't visualize well so I don't translate photos to reality that well."

And then I'm just going to remind myself, hey, but this is going to be awesome for these 10 reasons and let's look for some charming things even in the décor. So that's this predictable brain reaction. And then there's the unpredictable ones, this is when some shit goes sideways that you weren't expecting. So your luggage gets lost, you get in a really serious fight with your partner that you weren't expecting. You get bedbugs at your Airbnb.

You still get to decide whether you're going to have an amazing vacation or not. So, February, gentleman consort and I went to Morocco and we got caught in a blizzard on the Atlas Mountains, which was terrifying. We were



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literally 7,000 feet above sea level. It's the highest mountain pass, the highest mountain road in North Africa. It was a blizzard in the desert. Cars were sliding off the road. Thank God, we didn't see anybody go over a cliff but people were sliding into snow drifts off the road. It's a very narrow road, it's not a four lane highway or anything.

We got stuck in a traffic jam pretty close to the top because there had been a crash, of course, because most of the cars are not equipped for snow. And the snow plows couldn't get through because it's basically, one lane was open. So we spent half the time kind of gripping each other's hands and just being like, "Hopefully we're going to survive this trip." The trip was supposed to be five hours, it took nine hours. And the whole time our motto was, this is going to end up being way more memorable than if we had good weather and a nice view.

We decided right then that we weren't going to stress out about it. We were going to make it a feature of our trip. We were pretty sure we were going to survive. Our car did have four wheel drive and we had a driver and he was a local of the area. He was going really slow. When we got stuck in the traffic jam I did think we might have to sleep up there, but we were pretty sure we weren't going to die. But it would have been easy to get really stressed out about it, freak out the whole time, kind of ruin the trip for ourselves.

Then we got to the other side, we got to the end of the trip finally, this nine hour trip that was supposed to be five hours. And we were staying at this place, it's right on the edge of the desert. It's supposed to be this beautiful oasis with a pool. And instead, because of this blizzard and the same storm, it rained for literally three days straight non-stop, rained the whole time. The locals told us that it hadn't rained that much since the 80s. And then it rained so much that the road back over the mountains was closed, we couldn't drive back. We had to fly back, it was a whole thing.



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And again, we just decided that we were going to make this part of the trip. We were not going to sulk about how the trip had been ruined or be disappointed all the time. Our motto was, well, this will be a trip to remember because we've both traveled a lot even independently before we met each other and know that you do remember the beautiful places you go and those are lovely, they often blur together. I've been on 10 trips to Paris that went great. And I don't really remember that many specific details about them.

But you always remember the disasters and those are the ones you end up laughing about years later where the three flights were canceled and you had to sleep in the airport and at the time it was so horrible. But looking back it was such an adventure and now you remember it. You get to decide which of those perspectives to have. It's just a simple shift in perspective, but it really changes everything.

So you get to decide, are you going to be stressed out because your kids are fighting or because they lost your luggage and let that ruin your vacation? Or are you going to decide ahead of time, I'm going to have an amazing vacation, even if that means I'm going through some crazy stuff that will still be a story to remember? You get to decide.

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