

UFYB 314: Greatest Hits: Clean v. Dirty Pain



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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. I know that the world is feeling particularly heavy to a lot of us right now. There is so much suffering outside of us and inside of us but I think it's in times like this that thought work actually is the most important. If I've said it once, I've said it a million times, thought work is, it's not frivolous, it's not naval gazing, it's not only for privileged people or only for when things are going well.

Actually the deepest power of thought work is to help us stay centered and grounded when challenging things are happening. Because we're not really any use to the rest of the world or ourselves when we are discombobulated and thrown every which way by what's happening. So I wanted to reshare the episode on clean and dirty pain that comes from way, way back in the podcast archives this week because I really think it gets to the heart of the dilemma that a lot of us are dealing with which is how to be present with the suffering in the world and this month it might be a war in the Middle East, an earthquake.

And next week it might be something else and the next week it might be something else. There is always suffering happening somewhere in the world. There's always more pain than one human heart can bear somewhere in the world, sometimes it's right up close to home in our faces, in our families, in our lives. Sometimes it's something we're watching unfold from halfway across the globe. But I think many of us want to figure out how to bear witness and be conscious without being wrecked by that experience in a way that doesn't do any good to anyone and doesn't really help us make the world any better.

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So when you listen to this episode about clean versus dirty pain, a lot of the examples I give in this episode are from one's personal life. But it's completely relevant to our feelings about happenings in the world. And the distinction I would offer you is to think of clean pain as the kind of grief and empathy and compassion that we want to have for human suffering, whether it's close to home or far away. That's clean pain.

And dirty pain is the hopelessness, despair, helplessness, turning against each other, sort of funneling our frustration and our fear and our grief into raging at people in the world who don't agree with us or aren't performing their grief in the same way or just those around us in our daily lives. One of the most powerful ways of using this work is to expand your capacity for compassion and empathy and grief without being pulled down into despair, helplessness and hopelessness. And that I think is what I hope this episode will help you with.

And I want to encourage you to make the space to have those feelings. I think that we can get sucked into doom scrolling online, those of us who are not in these places personally, when something terrible is happening. We can get sucked into doom scrolling and feel like that's what witnessing requires or that's what caring means. But burning out your synopsis on social media is not what the world needs of you. And you actually can't get in touch with the grief, with the empathy, with the compassion when you're doing that.

So I really want to encourage you to pay attention to your emotional state and do the work that's needed to not get sucked into that helplessness, that despair, that doom scrolling, that burnout. There is always something terrible happening in the world. When we are lucky and privileged enough for it to not be us, I think it is a waste of our human life to turn ourselves into shells of what we could be by sinking into that defeatism. Instead if we have the privilege to not be living in a war zone, if we have the undeserved blessing and luck to not have our lives at risk right now.

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The most important thing we can do is cultivate the resilience and the hope and the compassion and the empathy that will have us do something that will help. We're not all going to parachute into a war to fight first hand but can we ask five friends to donate money? Can we reach out to someone we know is hurting, we know personally? Can we do something to increase understanding between people who are at odds? What can we do in our own lives and our own world and our own sphere of influence?

That is the antidote to the overwhelmingness of global problems that most of us don't have individual power to change. In order to do that you have to be able to distinguish between that clean grief and that dirty pain. So I hope you find this episode helpful. And I hope you found this preamble mini episode helpful and I am sending so much love to all of you.

So I want to tell you some things before I get into it. So, number one, this episode is going to teach a tool that will apply to a ton of different life situations.

So I can't fit every possible life situation in the title, so even if you are not planning to ever have to deal with a breakup or someone passing away, although it's unlikely to get through a human life without at least one of those things happening, the episode is still going to be really useful.

But here's the other thing I want you guys to know. So I get a lot of questions from you all asking me to do a podcast about X or Y or Z life situation. And what I want to remind you before I get started today is it's never about the circumstance. That's the whole point of this work. It is always your thoughts that are causing your feelings, and any of the tools I teach will work for your thoughts or feeling in any circumstance.

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So the reason that - I'm always happy for you guys to write me with episode requests, so I'm not saying that to discourage you, but I want to make sure that you're not telling yourself that if there isn't a specific episode on what to do when your childhood best friend sleeps with your brother and then they steal your prized Pekinese dog that you can't do thought work on it. You have to wait until I do an episode on that.

Or you sent in a listener question and you can't do anything until I answer it because I can't answer all the questions I get. You can always use any of the tools I teach on any problem. So that's just the sort of overall advice I want to give you guys.

But that being said, of course, there are some common thought patterns that tend to arise in connection with some common life experiences, and I think that breakups or losing someone, I think a breakup is a loss. Someone losing someone in a breakup or losing someone who passes away is one of the common experiences that most people will have that tend to produce a kind of similar set of thoughts.

So, I'm going to really be teaching you about the concept of clean versus dirty pain. That's really the core of what this episode teaches and that concept is useful and necessary to any human who ever suffers for any reason, which is all of us.

I'm going to start by talking about a breakup because almost everyone has been through one, so it's kind of a useful example. Not all of us have lost someone really close to us yet. So let's start with breakups. They are notoriously horrible and painful, and our emotional pain and misery in a breakup is so intense that it actually manifests physically.

So, there's actually been a study showing that taking painkillers, like taking Tylenol can help mitigate the pain of a breakup. Like, the emotion pain of it, which I just think is a fascinating illustration of the connection between your

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mind and your body. When you are in a lot of mental and emotional pain, it manifests physically.

We all kind of accept that breakups are going to be horrible, especially if you loved the person or you weren't the one who wanted the breakup. But why? We all just assume that they have to be horrible but that's actually not true. I'm going to tell you a secret. Breakups do not have to be horrible.

A few months ago actually I broke up with my partner of five years and it was sad and we both cried and I miss him sometimes and I'm sure he misses me sometimes. But I really didn't suffer. It didn't take me months or years to get over it. I was able to eat, I was able to sleep, I was able to do my work and carry on my life. I was not tormented.

I remember being younger and feeling so devastated by breakups. And I wondered like, how does anybody function when people have families and high-pressure jobs, and what about people who get divorced, how are they functioning at all? What I didn't realize of course was that it wasn't the breakup that was causing all my suffering. It's the way I was thinking about it.

And now my thoughts are so different and I have done so much work on my thoughts that I can go through something like a breakup and feel sad but not cause myself a lot of unnecessary suffering and not be paralyzed because I know how to navigate it. And that's what I'm going to teach you today, and I like to call this tool ABCD.

So A equals allow, B is for feeling bad, C is for carrying clean pain, and D is for ditching dirty pain. I'm going to talk you through what each one of those means and then I'm going to give you some examples. So, A and B are allowing feeling bad. First you have to be willing always to feel your negative feelings.

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I talk a lot on this podcast about how unwilling we are as humans to have negative feelings. Our brains think that negative feelings mean that we are dying. Our brain thinks anxiety means we're literally being chased by something that's going to kill us and our brain thinks that rejection or sadness means we're going to be abandoned by the tribe in the middle of the night and die alone in the jungle, probably be a snake. Death by snakes in the jungle.

We are wired to seek pleasure and avoid pain because the people, the early humans who survived to pass on their genes were the people who sought pleasure and avoided pain. The problem now is that our pain now these days for most of us able to listen to podcasts is very rarely survival related. It's usually emotional, which means it's actually harmless.

I want you to really think about that. A feeling, any feeling is actually harmless. No matter how bad it feels, it's harmless. It can't hurt you. It's just a sensation in your body. So the first thing we have to do if we're trying to cope with a breakup or any other challenging situation, anything, any break or rupture or loss or transition that we didn't choose, that isn't happy, we have to allow the feelings.

We have to be willing to feel how we're going to feel. I sometimes find this the most challenging thing to explain when I teach this work but it really is about mental willingness. It's a thought-based shift that you can feel in your body. Sometimes I will find that I am tensing up and looking to distract myself or I'm looking to negotiate with reality in my brain and I will realize that I'm getting all agitated because I'm just anticipating that I'm going to have a negative feeling that I don't think I'll like.

I'm just anticipating that I'm going to feel bad, and then I pause and I ask myself, what if I were just willing to feel however this is going to feel? And that question creates an immediate release for me. I can feel my whole body relax. I'm no longer tensing in anticipating of what is going to come.

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I'm no longer trying to furiously negotiate in my brain about what should happen so I can feel a certain way.

If I am just willing to feel however I'm about to feel, then I no longer have anything to fear. If you think about kind of martial arts or any other sport where you have to learn how to fall a lot, what you're taught is not to hold yourself super tense because that's how you get injured. If you tense your whole body and then fall down, you crash like a board. You're going to really hurt yourself.

You're going to hit the ground flat and tense and you can't adapt or soften or respond. If you can fall softly, if you can relax while you fall, you are so much more flexible and you won't get hurt. The same is true emotionally. If you are tensed up and unwilling to have the feelings you're having, you're making them so much worse.

If you can relax and mentally allow the feelings, which means not telling yourself something's going wrong, not telling yourself that you shouldn't have the feeling or that it's a problem, it'll be so much less painful. And the paradox of thought work is you can't process an emotion until you're willing to feel it fully.

You can't use thought work to go around negative emotions and avoid ever having them. There's a Buddhist saying that the only way out is through. And that's really true. You won't be able to change your thoughts and therefore eventually change your feelings until you're willing to have them. So that's AB. Accept bad feelings.

And honestly, I don't even like calling them bad. They're just feelings. There's nothing wrong with them and all of our categorization of negative and positive feeling I think by itself can produce some resistance. But B comes after A in the alphabet and I don't make the rules on that. So we're going to go with bad feelings here.

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So once you've allowed the feelings, you're willing to have them, you've done A and B, that's when you can start working with C and D, which is clean versus dirty pain. And again, this is not my favorite terminology. I really don't like labeling feelings as better or worse or clean and dirty, but in this case it's a useful shorthand and it fits my acronym so we're just going to live with it.

So I define clean pain as the kind of pain that we want to feel. Yes, you heard that right. There are some kinds of negative emotion that we may want to feel because those feelings are part of the full human experience. This is clean pain that we want to carry with us. Not forever, but we want to pick it up and take it along for the ride.

I may want to be sad if one of my parents dies. I may want to empathize if my best friend loses a child. I may want to allow for grief or loss or sadness or nostalgia or bittersweet memories. Now, notice I said may. There's no list of objective emotions we all should have or should want to have. It's going to be totally different for everyone.

You might be devastated if a parent dies or you may have no relationship with your parent and feel nothing if they die but then grieve a friend or a pet for years, or vice versa. Or grieve in general might not be the pain that you want to embrace. It might be something else. So I'm not giving these examples to say these are the ones you should want to feel. I'm just giving you different examples of situations in which some people may want to carry clean pain with them because it's part of the full spectrum of human experience. We want to be able to feel it.

Love and loss are in proportion to each other. We experience loss because we experience love. So the defining characteristic of clean pain is that it really flows through you pretty clearly. I find that you can actually feel the clean pain is kind of sharp and clear and pure almost, and it tends to come in waves with breathers in between.

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Dirty pain on the other hand feels very stuck and clogged. It feels very murky. It can often feel kind of unbearable and there's often agitation and wanting to escape it. It feels like suffering. Not just pain. Dirty pain is created when you are thinking negative thoughts about yourself or someone else, or the circumstance.

So another way to say it might be that clean pain in a funny way almost comes from positive thoughts. When we love someone, we feel pain when they die because of that love. But if someone dies and we're creating anger, either at them or about their death, we are creating dirty pain. Dirty pain comes from negative thoughts and resistance.

You can also think about it in the sense of pain versus suffering, which is something the Buddhists teach. The teaching there is that pain is inevitable as a human, but suffering is optional, and that suffering is created by resistance and attachment. Meaning resisting what is, resisting reality and being attached to certain outcomes or experiences or possessions or whatever else. Whereas allowance and acceptance will reduce or release your suffering, leaving only pain.

So you could use any of those terms or something else. You can think about it as clean or dirty pain, you could think about it as kind of coming from positive or negative thoughts, you could think about it as pain versus suffering, but the central distinction is similar.

Clean pain is the kind of negative emotion that we want to create a feel because it's part of the spectrum of human existence and it honors us and it honors others and our experiences. But dirty pain is suffering that we create with resistance and anger and shame and self-loathing, and other forms of negative emotion that revolve around the belief that you or someone else or reality is wrong or bad and shouldn't be the way it is.

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So I want to walk you through a couple of examples. Let's take a breakup. If you're going through a breakup, you may want to feel grief or sadness or loss. You may want to remember the love that you shared and you may want to feel bittersweet about this transition. You may want to honor the vulnerability and the love you created and give yourself time to sit with your sadness and heal.

What I really find also is that in general, clean pain, the intensity lessens over time. So with clean pain, my experience is that it is most intense at the time that it begins. Like, when you find out about whatever has happened, whether if it's a breakup or it's a loss of someone or whatever it is, the most pain is at the beginning.

But even then, it comes in waves and then over time the waves often go down, and that in between the waves, you can kind of get on with your life. That if you allow space for the emotions, in between those waves, you're able to kind of function. And as time goes on, you're able to function more.

Dirty pain is the opposite. It's hating the other person, blaming them for your feelings, arguing with reality about whether this should have happened, thinking about how you'll never find someone else and you'll die alone. Thinking about how you're not good enough and you never will be good enough.

It's taking it personally, making it mean something about you, making it mean something about them, making it mean something about your future or your past. That it was a waste of time, you shouldn't have spent that time with the person, they didn't deserve it. Now there's something wrong with you and no one's going to love you.

All of that is dirty pain. All of those thought patterns create anger and shame and despair, and that is dirty pain. You're projecting into the future and creating doom for yourself, or you're believing that there's something

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wrong with you or you're arguing with the reality of how the other person is or the decision was made.

All of that dirty pain will feel overwhelming and exhausting and heavy, and you will feel like you can't do anything else or function because you're so tired. And it will feel worse and worse over time or it will feel like it's never improving, you'll feel stuck, you'll feel stagnant, and that's because you keep thinking the same negative self-loathing thoughts over and over, or you keep making the same terrible prediction about your future over and over. And then each day that future comes true because of how you're thinking about it.

I'll tell you guys, I actually got a massage over the weekend and the body stores memories and things in different places. It's fascinating. If you get a lot of body work you know what I'm talking about, and my massage therapist was working on this area of my back and I was flooded with memories of this relationship I had in my early 20s.

It was all so present to me again. And I felt this like, rush of emotion and this sort of very clean sadness about it. It was almost more like bittersweet. It was like, so much love for who I used to be and who he was and without giving too many details, we just made a big mess across multiple continents and I felt so much love for who I was and for who he was and just what a mess we had made. And I felt this bittersweet sadness about it but also so much love about it, and that felt - it was so clean to me.

And it was such a contrast to how I felt about that breakup when it happened because when it happened, which was 15 years ago now, or probably 10 years ago, somewhere in between, it was all dirty pain. I just really believed we were supposed to be together and this had gone wrong and that had gone wrong and he had done me wrong and I wasn't good enough and it was so much dirty pain and suffering. It took me years to get

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over because of my own mind, because of the suffering I created with my story about it.

And it's almost like I re-grieved it in a clean way, in the space of like, an afternoon. It really didn't take that long. But it felt so clean and so loving even in the sadness, even - I was crying but I felt like I was crying out of love and sadness and like, sort of bittersweet loss and love for who we were. So that's a breakup example.

Let's take the example of a death of a friend. If a friend dies, you may want to be sad. You may want to miss them. And again, I'm not saying you have to. Sometimes people die and we don't miss them or feel sad. For instance, if we weren't very in touch with them and we didn't have any physical experience of them very often, if our relationship really mostly existed in our mind, it may not feel like that much has changed.

And that's okay too. But sometimes we do have a lot of interaction with someone or we don't but we still want to feel sad about their absence. That is clean pain. Dirty pain would be the suffering you create for yourself by thinking about how unfair it is that they died or the suffering you create with regret about your past actions or recriminations in your mind about their past actions.

All of these are essentially arguments with what has happened, which can never be resolved. So they will always feel upsetting and frustrating and stagnant and they will just keep repeating like that. So much of the suffering we experience when someone dies or we go through a breakup or we experience any other kind of loss or rupture is dirty pain.

So ultimately I think there are three ways we create dirty pain and unnecessary suffering when we're dealing with the death or a breakup or any other kind of transition or loss or rupture. Number one, we resist reality

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and what is happening. We think things should be different. Byron Katie says when you argue with reality, you lose, but only 100% of the time.

Number two, we layer negative meaning on the situation. We make it mean something bad about ourselves or about the other person. We believe that it's proof something is wrong with us or wrong with someone else. And number three, we believe it means something about the future. We project out to an unhappy future and we blame it on the breakup or the death. We give the event too much power to determine our future.

So when you're working through some kind of loss or a rupture, a death, a breakup, anything else that is a transition that you didn't necessarily want, or from one state to another, I want you to remember ABCD. And you will probably have to cycle through the process over and over again and keep using the tool and that's okay.

Allow bad feelings, carry clean pain, ditch dirty pain.

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