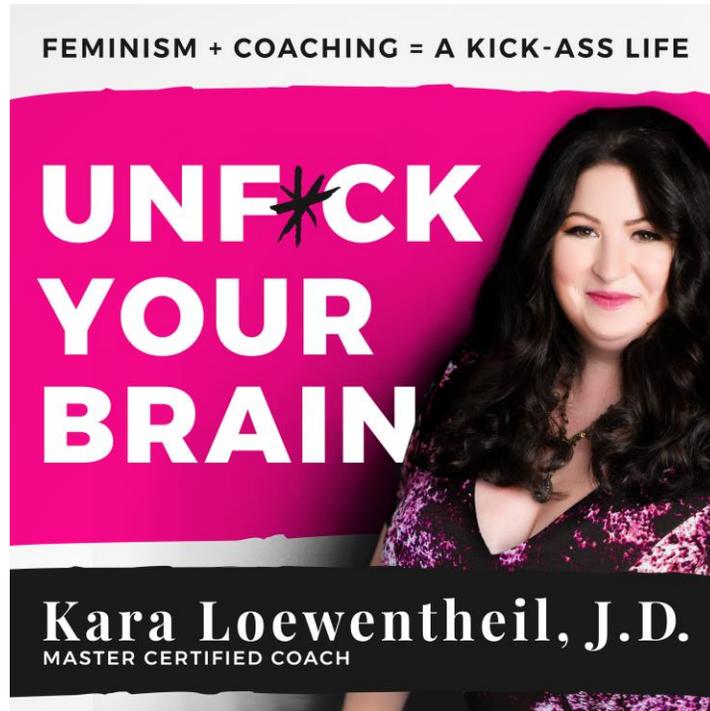


UFYB35: Contrast of Emotion



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB35: Contrast of Emotion

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 how here's your host, Harvard law school grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello, my chickens. So, I want you all to know that while you'll always be my original chickens, I rented a place in Vermont for the summer and I am now very tempted to get actual chickens. Fresh eggs, you guys – I could put them on my roof in New York. I feel like it would be fine.

Actually, I go to a dermatologist in New York – you know, annual skin checks is not part of my life coaching, but everybody should get their annual skin check. Anyway, my dermatologist, for reasons that are unclear to me, has chickens on the roof of his office building in Greenwich Village. So when you go to an appointment, you can also get eggs from the fridge in the office in the waiting area; very strange.

Anyway, you guys will never be replaced by real chickens because I don't think they would appreciate the podcast as much as you would. And I do – my family does have goats upstate. We have a place upstate for the summer and the goats eat everything. So we definitely can't have *Unf*ck Your Brain* goats because they would just eat the podcast instead of listening to it.

So this whole farm plan is not so thought through, as you can tell. We won't do that just yet, but I do think someday we should have some kind of country retreat where we can have gatherings and people can come hang out and get their brains unfucked. I think that would be super fun.

Anyway, so this is not just my ten-year dream journal. While I was in Vermont this past weekend, I went for a hike, voluntarily of my own free will. And when I put it that way, you'll probably guess that I do not normally hike. I am not a hiker. I get covered in bug bites unless I soak myself in

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DEET. That natural bug spray does nothing. The bugs are just like, “You taste like cloves and cinnamon and garlic now,” or whatever it is they put in natural bug spray. It does nothing. Bugs eat me alive. My hair gets super frizzy. It’s a whole situation.

But the woods are really beautiful up there and I took the whole weekend off and low and behold, I found myself wanting to go for a hike. And it was gorgeous. It was also really hot and sweaty and my calves were screaming by the end, but afterwards, I felt amazing and it reminded me that contrast is such an important part of life.

It feels really good to lounge around, for sure. I do that a lot. But it feels even better to lounge around after having done something active. And I think our brains often want us to forget about contrast because our brains don’t want to expend energy, so your lizard brain is like, “Let’s just lounge around all the time. That way I don’t have to expend that energy. I can save it. I can bank it in case I have to run away from a bear.”

Your brain never wants to expend energy so it just always wants the shortcut, right. It just always wants the false pleasure or to sit still or whatever it can do to get a hit of dopamine or get a hit of feel-good hormones without doing much work.

So today, I want to talk about contrast. Not just physical contrast but especially the contrast of emotions. So if I told you that I had a magic pill that you could take that would get rid of all of your negative emotion, would you want to take it? And I think a lot of us would. We don’t like feeling anxious or angry or afraid or sad or insecure. We want to just snap our fingers and feel better.

And in fact, we dislike the experience of negative emotion so much that we spend a ton of time and energy numbing-out to avoid feeling them. We sue

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food or booze or drugs or shopping or Netflix or whatever we use to get out of our own brains and out of our own bodies.

I see this with my clients all the time. As soon as they start working with me, they always want to feel better right away. They aren't willing to have their negative feelings. And I don't blame them because their thought is something like, "Well I've had these negative feelings for so long; that's why I hired you. Why do I need to have them any longer?"

But the truth is that most of us are not having our negative feelings. We are resisting our negative feelings. We think there's something wrong with those feelings. We think they shouldn't be there. We want them to go away. We're desperate to escape them.

Think about it like trying to hold a beach-ball under water. It takes so much effort and it never succeeds for long. The ball keeps coming back up and that's what happens with your negative emotions too. If you resist them or try to shove them down or away, they will just come back up.

So today, I want to talk about why you might want to welcome your negative emotions. And I know that sounds crazy – just stay with me because here's the thing; just like resting after a hike, experiencing the beauty of positive emotions pretty much requires that we be willing to experience negative emotions too.

It's the contrast between negative and positive emotion that helps us experience the joys of love and connection and gratitude and excitement and all the other positive emotions we want to feel. In fact, some positive emotions absolutely require the presence of a negative emotion to exist.

Think about courage. Courage doesn't exist unless there's also fear. Forgiveness doesn't exist unless there's also anger. If there's no fear, you don't need courage and if there's no anger, you don't need forgiveness. If

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you're not afraid, what you do isn't brave. If you're not angry, then creating closure and forgiveness for someone isn't meaningful.

Not all positive emotions require the presence of negative emotion just to exist, like courage or forgiveness. But taken together, our positive emotions do require the contrast of negative emotion. How would we even know that they're positive if we didn't have the experience of the negative emotion to compare them to?

If you always felt amazing, you wouldn't know it was amazing. And when you take a step back and think about it, human life is full of contrast, even the natural world; hunger and then fullness, waking and then sleeping, love and loss, happiness and sadness, day and night. A lot of the ancient religions have some form of a complimentary pair like that; yin and yang or an original god and goddess who created the world or heaven and hell.

It's the contrast of these things that let us enjoy them and know that they're different. But because we don't know how to cope with and process emotion appropriately, we do whatever we can to avoid the negative emotions. And in the past, there were less options for this, but now, with modern food availability and online shopping and entertainment, there's so many options for avoiding our emotions.

You can go your whole life never really being present with yourself and that's what we do. We avoid the negative emotions. We never let ourselves get hungry, even though that would allow us to truly experience fullness. We never allow ourselves to love completely in fear that we should ever lose it later. We don't take risks. We sacrifice the joy of feeling proud of ourselves that we might have in order to avoid feeling shame or fear of failure.

And the truth is, it doesn't even work that well because if you drink to avoid your emotions, your emotions are still there the next day. They didn't

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actually go away. You still have to deal with them, except now you're hung-over too and then you feel bad about that, and so the cycle goes on and on.

You cannot live your life as if it's a videogame or the goal is to avoid as much negative emotion as possible. I mean, you can, some people do, but I really don't recommend it. Truly experiencing human life means embracing the contrast, and that includes the contrast of emotion. Negative emotion is not a problem. It's not an emergency. It's harmless.

I'm going to say that again because most of us live our entire lives trying to avoid it. Negative emotion is harmless. It's just a sensation in your body. It's not going to kill you. And negative emotion is what allows us to experience positive emotion too. The contrast of emotions is what makes human life human.

So many of us deal with our negative emotions by just trying to blur out the contrast. We sort of half work all the time so we're never truly focused and trying and we're never fully resting. We half invest in our relationships, so we're never truly vulnerable, but then we never – we tell ourselves we won't ever have to fully experience loss. And we go half in on our dreams so that we never fully succeed, but we can pretend that we never fully failed either.

But what if you embraced the contrast? What if you were willing to have any emotion? What if you welcomed negative emotion? And not even just because it's what makes positive emotion possible, though it is, but because every emotion teaches you something about your own brain.

Really imagine that. What would it be like if you were excited to have negative emotion? What if you were excited to feel anger or fear? What if you looked forward to feeling insecurity or anxiety or shame?

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How would that change your life? Any time you have a negative emotion, it's caused by a thought. So the more you welcome those emotions, the better you can figure out what thought is underneath them. And the more you learn about your thoughts, the more control you have over your life.

So your negative emotions aren't something to reject and push away. They're part of you and they're an invitation to bring your attention to your brain and to yourself. Every negative emotion is telling you something. It's not a true message from the deep about reality, but it's telling you something about what's going on in your brain.

It's a way to get to know yourself. Every negative emotion is a signal to you that you are having a thought about something and figuring out what that thought is will teach you something about your own life and your own brain.

But when you're screaming loudly, trying to drown out the negative emotion or putting your fingers in your ears or distracting yourself, you can't hear the message. Human life is not supposed to be uninterrupted positive emotion. You're not supposed to be happy all the time.

If it was, we wouldn't even register that it was positive. Feeling negative emotion a good portion, maybe even half the time, is a normal part of being human. And I think that varies; my teacher always says half the time. I feel like for me it's a quarter of the time, but it's definitely there. Nothing has gone wrong; negative emotion is just a part of human life. They aren't a sign that there's a problem. They aren't an emergency.

They can't hurt you. Really think about that. We all think our feelings can hurt us. We think that a negative emotion like grief or loss or sadness or rejection or shame is, like, a disaster. We think it's an emergency. We need to do anything to avoid it.

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It's just a physical sensation in your body. Shame is just having a hot face. It's really not a crisis. And if you learn to listen to those negative emotions, if you are willing to have them, to physically experience them the same way you would a headache or a menstrual cramp or anything else, they will actually help you live a deeper richer life and they will teach you what you need to know about yourself.

The more that you develop your relationship with yourself, the better your life gets. And being willing to have negative emotion and to explore the thoughts that are causing it is really the secret to that relationship.

Okay, my chickens, have a wonderful week. Some of it will be happy, some of it will not be happy and that's okay. Welcome to being human.

Thanks for tuning in. If you want to start building your confidence right away, you can download a free confidence cheat sheet at www.karloewentheil.com/podcastconfidence.