

UFYB 62: SELF CARE



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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. Happy 2019. How crazy is that? It's a new year, and with a new year comes a lot of new possibilities. And I think, what a lot of us do, is we set unrealistic goals and expectations for ourselves, and then we pretty much give up on them immediately, or like three weeks in.

So that's part of why I picked this topic for today, this topic of, kind of, self-care. And before I get into the meat of self-care, I want to talk a little bit about how I came to it and why. And one of my goals for 2019 is really having more clear differentiation between when I'm working and when I am not working.

And I've been thinking a lot lately about the difference between working in concentrated bursts and then taking time off, versus sort of half working and half relaxing all the time; mixing those categories together. And I think that entrepreneurs especially, but also just other people who have jobs where you always could be working or doing more, like when you do intellectual labor that you take home with you – this is true as an academic and a lot of jobs these days.

And especially if you can or do work from home, if you're in any of those categories, people tend to have a lot of trouble in really creating clear distinctions between work time and non-work time. So for me, for instance, my desk is literally in my living room because I live in Manhattan.

And I love working from home, but it also means that there's no physical separation between my work and my leisure life in terms of spaces, other than just not sitting at my desk. And so I have to work really hard to create true boundaries.

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I think a lot of people struggle with this and I'm sure it's always been a problem in some ways, but I think it's gotten exponentially worse because of cell phones. So maybe six months ago, I realized that I was often spending my downtime with one or more screens active if I was at home.

I don't have this problem when I'm out, which a lot of people do. But when I was home., if I was here alone, I often had some kind of screen going and I was diverting my attention to multiple places. And even if I was reading a book or cooking or doing something where I'm not looking at a screen, I was checking my phone pretty frequently, or I might even be watching a movie but also looking at my email, or I might be sitting in a park but scrolling my phone.

And I noticed that a lot of the times I was diverting my attention in this did involve my phone. And I think our cell phones are so ubiquitous and they are just filled with different activities that create small dopamine bursts that build up over time. Now, I don't like the word addiction in this context, especially because I think it has a negative connotation that just creates feelings of helplessness and shame.

It makes it sound like, "Oh it's an addiction. We have to send you to cell phone rehab." So I don't think that's useful, but we do know that we create habitual behaviors with our cell phones based on these little hits of dopamine. So whether it's a text from a love interest or it's somebody liking your Facebook photo or it's a game you're playing, we start to associate our phone with the possibility of a dopamine hit.

And we have our phones on us all day long. In fact, in some of the studies of how rats respond to drugs, one of the things they found is that if you give rats a lever that always delivers a drug and you give rats a lever that randomly delivers a drug but not always, rats will hit the random one more often and longer, because if it always gives it to us and then one time it

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doesn't, after a couple of times we're like, "Oh, shit's broken. It's not going to work."

But if it has historically given us a hit of dopamine or pleasure at random intervals, then we will keep trying to get it for a really long time. And that's what our phones are like. And we have them on us all day long. So some of us are starting to lose the ability to be present with whatever we're doing.

And a lot of the things that we're losing the ability to be present for are kind of gentler but more sustainable pleasures – even watching a movie, which is not necessarily natural, reading a book, taking a walk – they don't have these concentrated erratic hits of dopamine. And so even there, I think our attention spans are getting shorter.

So I personally have been working a lot on doing one thing at a time lately and on allowing the urge to check my phone to come up without acting on it; like feeling what it feels like to want to check my phone and not do it. And I do think that because I was raised before cell phones, I maybe have a bit of a head start on this.

For instance, I'm totally able and don't have a problem going on a date or having dinner with a friend and not checking my phone. That doesn't even occur to me. But from what I can see around me in the world, a lot of people do have trouble with that. For a lot of people, this dependence on and this habit-building has gotten so intense that they can't even be present with other people in the real world without checking their virtual world.

And a lot of us – well not me, but maybe a lot of you – have your phones set to alert you anytime anybody does anything, anytime there's a possibility of a dopamine hit, which is just insanity. I don't know how anybody gets any work done if they have their phone setup that way. Mine does not tell me anything unless my mother is calling with an emergency.

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So anyway, I am working on spending more time alone without looking at my phone to kind of create the space for daydreaming and reflection and musing and thinking. When we are constantly stimulating ourselves with these little dopamine hits, I don't think we create any time to think and be creative and get lost in thought.

I think our life can start to feel like a computer game itself, just these constant tiny meaningless pings. And all of that is what has me thinking about self-care and what it truly means, because I think part of the reason we're so obsessed with self-care is we feel so alienated and burnt out and exhausted. And a lot of that, I think, is from constant overstimulation that isn't ever really pleasurable.

It's almost like you burnout from a low dose of – not false pleasure exactly, but like illusory pleasure. So self-care is obviously a word that gets thrown around a lot. And I think in today's media and online world, we hear about self-care all the time. Even the New York Times had an article about it this summer. So if the New York Times covers a social phenomenon, that means it's been around for 10 years already, so it's obviously here to stay.

And I was kind of curious about what we're taught is self-care. So I Googled to see what would come up as self-care. So I'm going to read you all a very partial list of what the internet tells us is self-care.

So, bubble-baths, buying things, skipping commitments, watching Netflix, eating dessert, seeing friends, being nicer to ourselves, cutting, quote en quote, toxic people out of our lives – you all know what I think about that one – facemasks, yoga, listening to music, working out, not working out, eating kale, not eating kale, saying yes, saying no.

So in other words, self-care can be pretty much anything depending on who's writing the article and who is reading it. But I think there are two interesting things about the way we generally talk about self-care. So I'm

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going to talk about each of those in-turn, and then I'm going to tell you how I like to think about self-care.

So the first is that I think the cultural dialogue kind of conflates two very different approaches. And one approach is to define self-care as things you do on a consistent ongoing basis to care for your physical, mental, and emotional health. And these are things that may or may not be enjoyable in the short-term, but create wellbeing.

The other way, and what I think gets more play sometimes, is thinking about self-care as kind of random – not necessarily random, but one-off or occasional or sporadic things you do on a short-term basis because they feel good, because you get a hit of dopamine.

I think that the first definition is closer to the true origin and purpose of the concept, but I think we all tend to default to the second definition because calling it self-care is a way to help ourselves feel less guilty about wanting to eat cake or watch TV or checkout of life or our circumstances that we think are draining us. And I say think we're draining us, because, of course, it's never our circumstances; it's our thoughts about them.

So what I see is that what that really means is we're using the term self-care to describe the actions that we take to try to soothe or comfort ourselves from the impact of an unmanaged mind. So our unmanaged mind kind of runs us ragged and then self-care is, quote en quote, what we use to soothe and comfort ourselves.

If we're talking about that second definition, where self-care is kind of equivalent to temporary relief or pleasure, the whole reason that we want to skip the workout or watch all the Netflix or cut someone out of our lives is that we have thoughts that are creating negative emotion that we want to escape. So in other words, often what we are calling self-care is actually

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numbing or buffering; actions we use to create dopamine or checkout of the world so we don't have to feel our feelings.

And I want to be really clear that even kind of culturally virtuous actions, like things that are kind of culturally sanctioned to be virtuous can be like this. Like, working out can absolutely be a way of numbing and buffering if you are using it to assuage your guilt about eating or if you're using it to burn off anxiety that you're creating with your thoughts. If you are psychologically dependent on it and feel desperate if you can't do it, then you're using it to buffer.

So if you feel at all desperate or compulsive about exercise or if you get anxious if you can't go for a run one day, you're using it to numb or buffer, just like someone else might use wine or pizza. So that's why part of the reason I'm giving you this example is that I want to really draw your attention to what's the intention behind it. I'm going to talk more about that in a minute.

The other thing I think is interesting about the way we talk about self-care is that most lists or articles all focus on actions. So we're thinking about self-care as being about a set of actions that you take or don't take. But like in the example I just gave you, running can be amazing self-care if you do it because you like to feel strong and keep your commitment to yourself to run and it's a kind of regular part of your mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing.

If you're doing it to vent anxiety that you don't know how to manage or to burn calories so you can escape your feeling of guilt or shame about eating, then to me, it's not self-care. And that leads me to the distinction that I think is more important than self-care and that no one really talks about.

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Everybody is sort of talking about these different actions, but what I think what matters, which is not surprising, is the thought behind it. The why of self-care matters more than the action. Why are you taking whatever that action is, or not taking that action? Are you doing it to buffer or numb-out or comfort yourself from the ravages of your unmanaged mind? Are you trying to escape something or someone or get away from your feelings or your thoughts? Or are you taking action because you've consciously chosen it ahead of time as a way to promote your mental, emotional, and physical health in whatever ways those are available to you, which are different for everyone.

Now, given all that, given that the why matters, it won't surprise any of you to learn that I think the most important self-care activity that exists is managing your mind. Managing your mind is where everything in your life starts; your feelings, your actions, the results you have, it all comes from your thoughts.

And if you're new to this podcast, it's not because it manifests because of high-vibes or whatever. How you think literally determines how you feel and behave. And so, of course, your behaviors determine what you create, what results you get.

A lot of the self-care that I see my clients doing or the things they're calling self-care are doing things that produce a temporary dopamine burst or a temporary reprieve from stress. And so that might be like eating or drinking or watching Netflix or scrolling Facebook, or anything to get a little dopamine hit. Or sometimes, it's like staying home from a party because your thoughts about the party are making you anxious. That's what I mean when I say a temporary reprieve from stress.

The problem with sort of thinking of self-care this way is that whether it's to get the dopamine or to relieve the stress, it has to be repeated over and over because it doesn't change the thing that created the stress in the first

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place. Managing your mind is the only form of self-care that actually reduces the stress, the overwhelm, and the burnout. And it's the stress, overwhelm, and burnout that require self-care in the first place.

We want comfort because we feel stressed, overwhelmed, and burnt out, but we're creating those feelings for ourselves. Now again, it doesn't mean you shouldn't do those activities. The goal is not to never take a bubble-bath or never watch a movie or never eat cake or kale or never exercise or don't see friends.

The goal is to be able to choose to do those things and actually enjoy them for what they are, rather than needing them just to cope with the stress that you create for yourself with your mind. And rather than feeling like you need them desperately to unwind or you use them in ways that are actually contrary to your long-term wellbeing goals.

So if you think of self-care as something you do to soothe and cope after you've created a lot of negative emotion for yourself, it's never really going to change things. You have to think of self-care as the things you can do for yourself on an ongoing basis that create the conditions for you to not need so much comfort, to not be reliant on those manufactured hits of dopamine all the time.

Self-care is managing your mind so that you can experience work, experience rest, experience pleasure, and none of them have to feel desperate or compulsive, and none of them have to compensate for each other. It is more effort than numbing out, for sure, but the long-term benefits are well worth it.

And one of the best things you can do for your self-care right now, and by right now, I mean for the next three days, is to sign up for the Unf*ck Your Body Image Masterclass. It's happening January 6th, which is very soon.

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And in the class, I'm going to teach you all of these tools for improving your body image and creating less of a need and desire to numb-out.

This is truly what self-care is. So for instance, I'm going to teach you how to understand your brain's fixation on weight and appearance and how you can turn evolutionary biology to your advantage. I'm going to teach you how to do a visual detox, which is the only detox I will ever recommend. It's a scientifically proven way to improve your body image immediately.

I'm going to teach you specific thought-changing techniques that I've created for body image and body dissatisfaction. I'm going to teach you a foolproof way to create authentic gratitude and connection to your body. I'm going to teach you a mind-blowing reframe that will change how you relate to your body forever. And I'm going to teach you the ultimate powerful question you must ask yourself every day in order to change your body image permanently.

So this shit is the real self-care. And you'll also have a chance to ask questions and get answers live, which is super fun. So it is going to be such a good way to start 2019 on the right foot, and it's going to give you practices that will help you, over time, not feel the need to have kind of compulsive self-care or self-care that's just focused on escaping stress or creating dopamine, because you won't be creating that cycle for yourself.

So you can just go to www.unfckyourbrain.com/bodyimageclass, or you can just go to www.unfckyourbrain.com/62, and that will be the show notes page for this episode, and there'll be a link there, and I will see you there.

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