

UFYB 20: CONFIRMATION BIAS



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to the *Unfuck Your Brain* podcast, 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 here's your host, Harvard law school grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello, my chickens. So first things first, if you have not signed up for the Creating Confidence Challenge, I honestly don't know what you're doing with your life. Seriously, you guys, it's completely free. It's a five-day challenge with daily inspiration prompts and challenges from me and there's going to be a free Facebook group where you can ask questions and get support directly from me as you're doing the challenges.

So you seriously have nothing to lose. Unless you feel as badass as you could possibly be – in which case I don't know why you're listening to the podcast – get your beautiful butt over there and sign up. So the link is in the iTunes description, or just go to www.unfckyourbrain.com/confidence challenge.

Okay, so one of the tools that we're going to be working with in the challenge is confirmation bias; so that is what I'm going to talk to you guys about today. Now, I am totally obsessed with confirmation bias because once you understand what it is and how to deploy it on purpose, it is so incredibly useful. And once you know how to spot it, you'll also see all the times that your brain is using it to your detriment.

Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor and recall information in a way that confirms your existing beliefs or hypotheses. So in other words, we see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear. You've heard me say before that the brain is a pattern-making machine. Confirmation bias is one of the programs, to use that metaphor, to continue it, that it uses to make patterns.

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Once you believe something, your brain will look for more and more evidence to support that belief. And in fact, psychological studies have shown that confirmation bias is stronger for beliefs or opinions about which you have intense emotions, or that you've believed for a long time. So in other words, your unmanaged mind is the opposite of an objective scientist looking for evidence, laying hypotheses and deciding to believe only what is true.

It's more like a deranged philosopher trapped in a basement who has never even tried to go outside because he thinks only basements exist because that's all he sees around him. Confirmation bias means that your brain is always looking for more evidence of what it already believes. And here's what's really crazy – if you don't manage your mind on purpose, showing your brain contrary evidence – evidence that's contrary to your belief – can actually strengthen your belief. It makes you believe the thing you believe more.

So if you believe global warming doesn't exist and I show you evidence that it does, if you're not consciously managing your mind and willing to be uncomfortable – which I'm going to talk about a lot more in this podcast – if you are not managing your mind, you will actually become more committed to the idea that global warming doesn't exist when I show you the scientific studies that tend to prove that it does.

You will react to contrary evidence by doubling down on your incorrect belief. How wild is that? It's honestly amazing that any of us have survived this long with unmanaged brains. And when you're not managing your mind, what happens? Your brain is always looking for more evidence of its negative beliefs. And it will find it because your brain can interpret anything to match its beliefs. That's what confirmation bias does.

So if you believe you're not lovable, you will always be able to find evidence that you aren't lovable. For instance, I know a lot of you listening

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to this have that belief because all my clients have this belief, almost. And most of you have had several relationships before, but because they ended, you tell yourself they're evidence that you aren't lovable; when in fact, if somebody believed they were lovable, they would interpret those relationships as proof that they were lovable.

They might think, "Well I was in a relationship, so obviously I'm lovable and I'm just looking for my next one or a better match." Being in relationships that end is not objective proof of being lovable or unlovable. Your relationships are just a circumstance of your past. They don't have that inherent meaning either way. But your brain can interpret them in very different ways depending on which belief it is trying to maintain using confirmation bias.

Let's say you have a belief that you're not good at your job. It doesn't matter how much evidence there is of your success, you will explain all of that away. You'll say, "Oh I just got lucky. It was an easy case or project or deal. The other people involved really did all the work or the client just thought I was pretty." Right, whatever excuse you come up with in your brain and then you'll fixate on the few mistakes you've made or the places you didn't succeed and you'll be convinced that those are evidence of your failure.

So in other words, your brain will tell you, if there's success, that it's due to anyone but you. And if there's failure, it's always due to you. And here's the real wild thing about confirmation bias – the thing I want you guys to grapple with that's really so transformative. It's like your brain will actually distort neutral outcomes to see them as failures if that's what you're looking for.

So why does confirmation bias even exist when it really seems so counterproductive? There's a really interesting theory put forth by a couple of psychologists; their names are Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber. And they

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argue that human reasoning is not actually designed to lead to the correct or best outcome. It often does not reach the best or correct outcome at all. And that instead, it is designed to communicate with others. That human reason evolved as a persuasive tool to communicate and persuade other people to share your beliefs; not a diagnostic tool to find some kind of objective truth.

So in other words, people are really good at reasoning in order to make and support arguments and win other people over to their side, which makes sense because it's a socially useful skill. So I love this theory because it really supports something that I've observed over and over with my clients and in my own brain. And I often say that humans are very rational in that they follow a set of logical principles from a premise.

The problem is that the premise is often flawed, unhelpful or untrue. And this observation fits perfectly with the persuasion theory of reason that I was just explaining; that reason is a persuasive tool designed to get other people to agree with you, not an objective way of figuring out what's true. That's how the human brain works.

We start with something that may be totally bananas as a premise and then our brain is, nevertheless, very efficient and methodical about finding ways to argue for and support that premise. And when we're just thinking about this to ourselves over and over for decades, confirmation bias just gets stronger and stronger. And so we come to believe our own stories so deeply, we can't even see they are stories.

We persuade ourselves over and over and over until we are so deep in the story that we can't even see that anything might contradict it. I have clients who come to me and tell me with utter certainty that they always get dumped and they're unlucky in love. And then I make them go through their relationship story, and there are like 15 people that they decline to keep seeing in there.

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It turns out, what they really had subconsciously decided to think was, “Well I get dumped by everyone that I don’t dump first.” Which is true of everyone on earth unless one of you dies first.

Or I have clients come to me who are convinced they are lazy and don’t know how to work hard despite having gone to college, gone to law school or medical school, having worked as a lawyer at a big firm or become a surgeon; whatever they’ve done. They will simultaneously tell me that they worked for 14 hours the day before and then they’ll explain they had to work that much because they’re lazy.

It makes zero sense, objectively. If laziness is not doing work then if you are working for 14 hours, you are not being lazy. But if your premise is I am lazy, confirmation bias will make you interpret anything to fit that premise and you will not even see the contradiction. It’s one thing to understand this intellectually, but when you start to really get it emotionally, you start to see that all of your stories about yourself – that you have been telling yourself with an unmanaged mind for decades – are suspect because they have been created by confirmation bias.

Literally, the fact that you can list a whole bunch of evidence for your story about yourself means nothing. It’s as if you had glasses taped on your eyes that make everything look green. You keep insisting to me that you had so much evidence that things were green because you wouldn’t have realized that the glasses were what was making everything green.

Your evidence for your long-held negative beliefs are not reliable objective evidence; they are confirmation bias at work. So, one way to use the concept of confirmation bias is just to recognize that when it comes to your negative beliefs about yourself, other people and the world, you are like the world’s least reliable narrator. When your brain is unmanaged, it totally has an agenda and it is out to prove itself right no matter what the cost to you or your happiness or your dreams.

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And yeah, it can be a little disorienting to realize that you can't trust your own analysis of the, quote en quote, evidence. But when you practice this tool and recognizing when confirmation bias is happening, you'll start to see that this really creates freedom to be open to believing things you don't believe yet because your thoughts about your evidence to the contrary aren't reliable either. And that is really the second way to use confirmation bias to your advantage and it's my favorite part of this concept.

So here is how it works; most of us think that we need to see some evidence before we can believe something new. We want the new evidence to change our beliefs. What confirmation bias shows us is that shit does not work, which is why you haven't changed your beliefs about yourself in 30 or 40 years.

You literally won't even see evidence that confirms a different belief. Whatever circumstance happens, you will interpret it to support your pre-existing belief; whatever happens. So really let that sink in. You think, well if I just got some evidence that I was lovable. If I just got some evidence that I was good at my job. Is someone else just validated me in a way that would count as good evidence for me, then I could believe that I was lovable, then I could believe that I was good at my job. I just need some evidence.

But it's exactly the opposite because you won't even see that evidence. That evidence may be purple and you will think it's green because you have the green glasses on. And in fact, people have already loved you, already told you, you were good at your job. You have had so many opportunities to see evidence of the contrary belief, and you haven't seen them at all because confirmation bias was at work.

So you cannot wait for new evidence to change your beliefs. That is not how it works. There is no point in waiting around for contrary evidence. For any belief you have about yourself right now or other people or the world,

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there is contrary evidence all around you at this moment and a lot in the past that you didn't see because of confirmation bias. So the same will be true for any new evidence in your future.

The good news, though, is that that means you can start thinking new thoughts and believing them now. And in fact, if you give your brain new thoughts to look for evidence for, it will do that. Your brain wants structure. It wants an assignment. It's like an Australian shepherd puppy that doesn't have any sheep to herd. If you don't give it something to do, it is going to herd and destroy everything in your house; or your brain or your life. But if you give it a project, it knows what to do.

If you don't manage your brain, it is constantly collecting evidence of the beliefs it already has. That's how confirmation bias works. But if you give it a new assignment, it will start using confirmation bias on that new thought or belief. That's how you harness it to your advantage, right. What is something you want to believe about yourself? Give your brain that job of coming up with some evidence for that new thought. You cannot wait for the evidence to change your mind. My loves, that day will never come.

You have it backwards. You have to believe the new thought first and then you will start to see the evidence for it. And you will actually create the evidence for it because your thoughts create your feeling and your actions and your results. So if you start thinking the new thought and you believe it ahead of time, you will start to see evidence around you that confirms it and you will start to act in ways that produce more of it.

Let's take the lovable example. If you believe you're not lovable, what does that produce for you? You're constantly hustling for your worth; you're constantly hustling for your lovability. You're going to date whoever comes along, hoping they're going to validate you and change your belief about yourself. You're going to get into all the wrong relationships. They're going to be total disasters and they're going to continue confirming to you that

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you're not lovable. If you choose to think, "I am lovable. I can have a successful relationship," ahead of time before you have evidence for it because you can't even see the evidence that's there.

If you just start to practice that thought beforehand, you are more likely to get into better relationships and then you will create more results – more evidence for that belief. So it's a two-part issue. You will both see more evidence that's already there and you will actually create more evidence for the belief. But the belief has to come first. I cannot stress that enough. That is one of the secrets to life.

You have to believe it before you have evidence of it because you can't see the evidence until you start to believe it. So, let me be clear about one thing; when you start to try to do this, your brain likes to be efficient. And at first, it is not going to want to do anything differently. It's going to say, "Oh, not thinking something new – it's so much work. Can't I just look for more evidence of how terrible you are as a person? I'm really good at that one." Your brain likes to do its greatest hits.

But you are the boss of your brain, not the other way around. If you give your brain the assignment to look for evidence of something you want to believe and you don't take no for an answer, your brain will eventually get on board. If you decide to believe you are lovable, you are worthy, you're efficient, you're brilliant, you're brave – whatever it is – practice believing it before you have any new evidence. And rest assured that confirmation bias will kick in and help you find more and more evidence to support that belief.

Now, this is not going to feel good right away. We all like to be proved right. Being proved right makes us feel smart and safe even when the underlying thought and feeling that we think we're proving right is terrible. That's why your brain, sort of, wants to be right that you are awful. It doesn't make sense to your upper-level brain, your prefrontal cortex, but your lower-level brain being right means being safe. Your lizard brain wants to be right

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about which berries are poisonous and where the lions are, right. That feels safe and so it wants to be right about you being terrible too because it doesn't know the difference.

So being wrong about yourself and your thoughts about yourself feels kind of bad in the short-term. It is going to be uncomfortable and confusing and hard, but the payoff is so worth it on the other side. One of the things that is wild about humans is that we are so good at enduring the suffering that we create for ourselves with our negative thought patterns. We've been doing that for decades.

But then someone asks us to deal with a temporary discomfort of being wrong or learning something new or trying and failing at thought work a bunch of times as you learn how to do it and we freak the fuck out. We do not want to be uncomfortable for even a minute, even though being uncomfortable in a new way is actually the way you get out of the pain with which you're so familiar, of that suffering that you've been in for so long because the pain is familiar and comfortable. And that is what your lizard brain prizes over anything else.

So have compassion for your lizard, but be strong, be brave, be willing to be uncomfortable because on the other side of discomfort is a freedom you cannot even imagine right now and it is so worth it. Alright, my lizard-having chickens, that's it for this week.

We are going to be working on using confirmation bias to our advantage quite a bit in the Creating Confidence Challenge. So if you're not signed up for that, get moving because it starts on Monday, March 19th, so you only have a few days if you're listening to this right when it comes out.

www.unfckyourbrain.com/confidencechallenge. I'll talk to y'all next week.

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Thanks for tuning in. If you want to turbo-charge the Unfuck Your Brain Process, you can download a free five-minute self-talk makeover at www.redesignyourmind.com/selftalksoundtrack.