

Episode 1 - Question Your Brain's Authority



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[Perfectionist Professional Woman Podcast](#) with Keri Martinez

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Welcome to the *Perfectionist Professional Woman* podcast. This is Episode 1, Question Your Brain's Authority.

I'm Keri Martinez. I'm a wife and mother of three children and three bonus children. I'm also a certified life coach and a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For a good portion of my life, I equated perfection with happiness and success. I thought that striving to *be* perfect and *do* things perfectly was the key to feeling happy and to being successful. I've since come to realize that perfection *isn't* necessary to achieve either one of those--quite the opposite, in fact--and that has made such a difference in how I think, feel, and experience life. So if you're a professional woman and you'd like to know how to release perfectionism so you can trade self-doubt for self-confidence, stop beating yourself up, and start enjoying your life more, then come with me. Let's do this together.

Well hello! Thank you for tuning in. I'm so delighted to be here recording this podcast! I've had some things rattling around in my head--things I think would be beneficial to others--and I thought a podcast would be a fun way to share them. I personally love to listen to podcasts. I love to learn from them, be entertained by them, and I figure that if you're listening to this, there's a pretty good chance you're a podcast fan, too.

So let's dive right in, shall we? I'm excited to launch the inaugural episode of the podcast by discussing the topic of "questioning authority." It kind of sounds a little rebellious, and I have a little rebellious streak, so I think it'll be fun.

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I want to start with a short quiz--now don't freak out! I'm a former teacher, so quizzes are kind of in my blood. But this one should be a pretty painless and fun one. It's designed to give you some insights about yourself. Now, how this is going to work is I will read 10 sentences, and for each one, I'd like you to ask yourself if you've ever had this thought (or something fairly similar). Give yourself a point for each one you've thought before. And you can keep a tally on a piece of paper or use your fingers--whatever's easiest. OK? You ready? Here we go.

1. I'll never be able to (*and then fill in the blank*). This could be something like, "I'll never be able to lose weight" or "I'll never be able to learn to draw or stick to an exercise program or whatever." I'll never be able to....something.
2. I don't fit in.
3. Life isn't supposed to happen this way.
4. I don't have enough time.
5. I have to have (*and then fill in the blank*). This could be anything like "I have to have chocolate, or I have to have those shoes, some kind of gadget, a car, whatever".
6. This person (*could be your spouse, child, friend, neighbor, random person at the store, whoever*) this person shouldn't act or think that way.
7. There's nothing I can do about it.
8. I'm just not (*and then fill in the blank*). This could be something like "I'm just not good enough, or I'm just not an organized person, or I'm not an athlete, or I'm not a spiritual person."
9. This is too hard.
10. There's something wrong with me.

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Now, those are such happy thoughts, I know. Tally up your result. How many points did you get? If you got an eight or above--meaning you've thought eight or more of the sentences I just read--then I have some amazing news for you. You are completely human! I might even venture to say that the higher your score, the *more* human you are. And in fact, if you scored less than five, I'd like to meet you because you just might be a unicorn.

When I was 12 or 13, I remember being in a Young Women's class at church, and one of the older girls--she must've been 16 or 17--was giving a lesson. And she gave each of us a half-sheet of paper. In the middle of that paper there was a small yellow dot, and there were instructions that said something like:

Hold this paper a few inches from your mouth and breathe on the yellow dot. And If it turns red, see your doctor. If it turns blue, see your dentist. If it turns purple, see your lawyer and make out your will. (You know, stuff like that.) If it remains yellow, and it probably will, you are in good health and there is no reason why you can't prepare NOW to succeed.

So confession time--I actually blew on the yellow dot at the time to see if it would change colors. I think I might've been a little worried that it would. And of course it didn't, because it was just yellow maker, but the message from that piece of paper about preparing to succeed has stuck with me ever since.

And I bring that up because I like tests like that, and I'm using air quotes when I say 'tests.' I like tests or quizzes that tell you something about yourself

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and maybe even reinforce something you already know, but they do it in a humorous way to make a point and to help you remember the point. I'm hoping the quiz I gave you just a minute ago does the same thing.

So, what was the point of the quiz I gave you? Well, it was to get you thinking about how your brain operates, how it's designed to function, to point out that if you've ever had thoughts like those, it's completely normal.

Our brains are constantly offering up thoughts to us throughout each day. And in fact, [recent research](#) puts it at about 6,200 thoughts a day, and I've heard some say that it's 60,000 or more. The exact number isn't essential here--let's just say it's a lot. Even at the low end of that spectrum, we're talking six to seven thoughts for every minute you're awake. Just thinking about that feels a little exhausting to me.

Now, the interesting thing is the majority of those thoughts happen automatically, meaning they're from your brain's default mode, so to speak, and they happen without you even being aware of them. They're not things you consciously or intentionally choose to think, and most of them (upwards of 90%) are the same thoughts you had yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that.

So, my question when I first heard that was, why would your brain do that? Why would it operate on autopilot and keep recycling the same thoughts over and over? What biological or evolutionary purpose does that serve? Well, it allows your brain to be incredibly efficient, to use less energy. Did you know that [your brain uses about 20% of your body's total energy](#)? That's more than any other organ in your body. The three-pound gelatinous blob

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between your ears accounts for a relatively small percentage of your total body weight, but it requires a disproportionate amount of energy to operate. So, automating and recycling thoughts allows your brain to save energy, to be more energy efficient.

You may have heard the phrase, “neurons that fire together, wire together.” Well, this refers to how neural pathways are strengthened and become more efficient. Think of it like a footpath worn through a field of grass. The more you walk the same route through the grass, the more worn the path becomes and the easier it is to walk that path. Similarly, the more often neurons fire together in thinking a certain thought, the easier it is for your brain to reproduce that thought.

So you have thought patterns your brain started years ago, some as far back as childhood, and these have been repeated throughout your life. Those neurons have fired together so many times over the years that the associated neural pathways are really well worn in your brain! And unless you do something to intentionally interrupt or divert them, your brain is just going to keep offering the same thoughts, because that's how it maximizes efficiency.

You may have thought patterns from childhood that are now no longer relevant or that were actually never accurate in the first place, but they're so well entrenched at this point that your brain continues to offer them. The thing is, it'll keep doing that unless you challenge and question those thoughts.

Now as a side note, think of how much effort it would take to consciously and deliberately form every single thought...every day...for your entire life. It would

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be exhausting! So, it's beneficial that your brain operates that way, that it uses existing pathways whenever possible to save energy. It becomes problematic when the established pathways or thought patterns aren't accurate and they keep you stuck or limit your potential and progress.

So I'll give you an example. When I was growing up, my parents talked to me about establishing financial security by saving money, having a steady job, not going into debt, things like that. I don't remember them ever saying *not* to start my own business or that I shouldn't do that, but I somehow internalized the belief that a key component of being financially secure is working for someone else. It never even occurred to me that I *could* someday start my own business or that it might be a good idea to do that. That seemed like too much of a risk. It seemed scary. So that thought pattern continued until fairly recently when I began investigating and questioning my beliefs about money. Not that there's anything wrong with working for someone else, but I've started allowing myself to consider other alternatives. And I had to do that in order to be able to start my own business. And I have to say that's very freeing and fun to think about and to revisit those old beliefs and question them.

Now as I said earlier, most of our thoughts are unintentional. They're default thoughts offered by our brain, and a lot of them were initially triggered in attempts to protect us.

In fact, a lot of the thoughts I offered in the quiz at the beginning of the episode are thoughts our brain offers to protect us from possible failure and pain. Now, you may be wondering, how does thinking "*I'll never be able to lose weight,*" or "*I'm not good enough,*" or "*There's nothing I can do about it*"

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protect me from failure and pain? Well, those kinds of thoughts lead us to giving up before we even try, so we won't have to face the pain of trying and not succeeding. And because our brain offers them up on the regular, so to speak, we just accept them as fact. We take them as gospel truth, and we don't stop to question them or consider if they're even true.

But any thought in your head is just that--it's a thought. It's not a fact. It's a sentence your brain made up, and it's completely optional.

That idea rocked my world when I first learned it, when I first started to believe it.

I can vividly remember when that first happened. I was at one of the lowest points in my life. I was a mess at home. I was a mess at work. I felt like I no longer understood how to relate to people, how to do my job, how to be a mom, how to be a wife, how to solve basically any kind of problem. I felt like stuff I'd once understood and things that used to be easy to do were now incomprehensible and overwhelming. I felt like I was suffocating and in a dark and very confusing place, and I felt completely helpless to get out of it.

One day at work, I fell apart in my boss's office. After months of trying to pretend everything was OK, that I was fine, I just couldn't do it anymore. I started crying and I told her I didn't know what was wrong with me. And she thankfully responded so beautifully, so kindly, and gave me the exact advice I needed. She said that I might want to talk to someone, that I might want to see a counselor.

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Now I had resisted that idea before, and I confess I cringed a bit internally when she said it, but everything else I'd tried hadn't worked, so I figured it was worth a shot.

In the first meeting with the counselor, I described a particularly painful experience at work. I told the counselor I had hurt a colleague's feelings with something I'd said, but I didn't understand why what I'd said was wrong. I told the counselor exactly what I'd said and how my colleague had reacted, and then I said this incident was proof I no longer understood how to relate to people. Somehow I'd gotten all off kilter, and I didn't know how to get back and could the counselor please help me with that?

The counselor then asked me, "What if you didn't do anything wrong here?"

That question blew my mind. Up until that moment, I hadn't even considered that I *hadn't* done anything wrong--that I wasn't a problem. I had been thinking I was such a screw up and that everything was my fault. I had messed things up because I was defective or broken or not good enough or all of the above actually. I had repeated those thoughts over and over so many times--not just in this instance, but in many instances throughout my life that they were super well entrenched in my brain.

When the counselor asked that question, it felt like my brain came to a screeching halt. I think I froze for a minute and maybe even stopped breathing. I can only imagine what I must've looked like sitting there. But that question was exactly what I needed to challenge my brain's default thinking. It kind of shocked my brain into considering other alternatives.

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And I instantly felt about 20 pounds lighter! Seriously! My whole body felt different somehow. My chest opened up. My head felt less constricted. My stomach relaxed. My back and shoulders straightened. It was *amazing!* And all of that happened in a matter of seconds, simply because my thoughts had changed.

It seems almost laughable now that it had never occurred to me to question those thoughts. But before the counselor helped me do that, they FELT so true! The thoughts that I was a failure, that I was broken, that I was less than and not good enough--they all seemed like FACTS to me.

What I've come to realize now was that they only *felt* true because my brain had gotten so efficient at offering them up any time I experienced failure or some kind of stumbling block. And when the counselor helped me question those thoughts, I was able to start getting some authority over them--to realize I didn't have to just accept and agree with them. And that was life changing!

After that, I started to wonder, "What other thoughts do I not have to just accept and agree with?"

Do you remember that pasta sauce commercial from years ago where a woman who previously bought only one brand tries a different brand in a blind taste test and she discovers she actually likes the different brand better? Then she starts thinking about what other things she might have been wrong about in the past, like her fashion sense and some other things I'm not remembering right now. But my experience with the counselor reminded me of that commercial.

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We often have thoughts or beliefs swimming around in our head that we just accept as fact, but what if we're wrong about some of those?

What I have come to know from that counseling experience and later from coaching is 1) our thoughts are optional, and 2) our brains are something we can manage.

Those two principles right there--that thoughts are optional and we can manage our brains--are so liberating and empowering. At the risk of sounding a little overly dramatic, I think they're some of the ultimate secrets of the universe. And they're ideas I'd like to invite you to consider.

Maybe you already have. Maybe these are things you already know. When I first heard them, though, I couldn't help but think, why didn't someone teach me this earlier? Why didn't someone tell me my thoughts are optional and it's OK to question them? Why did it take me more than 40 years to learn this?

I'm not suggesting you question every thought that comes through your brain. I doubt that's even possible and I don't know that it would be useful. But why not, at least, begin by questioning the painful ones, the ones that might be causing a problem or needless suffering? Maybe it's beneficial to start asking about those thoughts, "Are they true?" And if they're true, how do you know? Who says they're true?

For example:

- *Who says you're not good enough?*

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- *Who says you'll never be able to lose weight?*
- *Who says life isn't supposed to be like this?*
- *Who says you don't have enough time?*
- *Who says you don't fit in?*
- *Who says there's nothing you can do about it?*
- *Who says you can't be financially secure while having your own business?*

Think about that. Who is the mystical authority figure that's decreed all of those things?

It's just your brain (or someone else's). And that doesn't make them true. Doesn't make them facts.

As a kid I remember seeing bumper stickers with the saying "Question Authority." I think that's pretty good advice when it comes to the authority of our default brains. We have this notion that any thought our brain offers to us (especially if it's done repeatedly) must be true. It must be a fact. Otherwise, our brain wouldn't keep offering it, right?

Well, no!

Our brains recycle thoughts because that's what they do to save energy. That's it.

Another interesting characteristic of human brains is that they desperately want to be "right." From an evolutionary standpoint, being right about potential dangers allowed us to survive. Now, even though we're not faced

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with tiger or bear attacks on a daily basis (or even ever, really), our brains still try to protect us from danger by being “right” about other things. And once your brain “knows” it’s right about something, it resists anything that contradicts that knowledge. It’ll look for and offer up all kinds of evidence to support what it “knows.” And--BONUS!--depending on how entrenched the knowledge or belief is, the more strongly your brain will resist anything that contradicts it.

In the case of my default thoughts that I had done something wrong, that I was defective or wrong or broken--my brain fought very hard to be right about those thoughts, and it was really good at looking for evidence from my past to support them. It took a shock to my system in the form of the counselor’s question to interrupt those default processes.

On the one hand, my brain was doing what it’s designed to do. It was saving energy and it was protecting me by being “right.” But on the other hand, it had gone a little off the rails. It’s kind of like what happens when someone has an irregular heart beat. Sometimes administering an electric shock can help restore a normal heart rhythm. And the counselor’s question to me was like a shock that helped restore more normal or more useful thought patterns.

Since then, I’ve learned to do this for myself, and in this and subsequent episodes I’m going to teach you how to do the same. Right now, I’m going to teach you a three-step process that’ll get you started. To set the scene, I’d like you to think of yourself like a quality control worker in your own brain. If you’ve ever seen people standing next to a conveyor belt in a factory, watching product as it goes by, and removing any that aren’t up to snuff --

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this process is kind of like that. Now, this is really going to date me, but if you remember the [intro of the Laverne and Shirley TV show](#) from the 70s, it showed something along those lines. Most of the time thoughts are just flowing by in your head, but when you notice one that might be a problem, you can pull it from the conveyor belt and examine it more closely. Is it something you want to keep thinking? Or is it something you'd like to question and possibly toss? The beauty is that YOU get to choose. You're the authority figure, not your auto-pilot brain.

Step 1

So, the first step in the three-step process is to dump out your brain. Write down the thoughts that are flowing by on the conveyor belt in your head. You could also type them into a document on your computer or your phone, if you prefer--whatever works for you. I don't know what it is about writing them down or typing them, but there's something about getting your thoughts out of your head and putting them somewhere you can actually look at them that's so much more impactful than just thinking about them. Writing them down helps you begin to recognize that you are not your thoughts. It also allows you to see your thoughts for what they are--just sentences your brain made up. It's too hard to see any of that while the thoughts are swimming around in your head.

There's a saying that you can't read a label from the inside of the bottle, and similarly, you can't get a good handle on what's going on in your brain from inside your head. The key here is not to censor or try to ignore what's on the conveyor belt. Write down all the thoughts--even the painful, ugly, or uncomfortable ones. I confess I had a hard time with this in the beginning. I didn't want to acknowledge the ugly and painful thoughts because they

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were, well, ugly and painful! But I want you to remember you are not your thoughts. And if it helps, know that you can always shred or delete the document later. There's no shame in that.

Step 2

The next step, once you've got your conveyor belt of thoughts in a format you can actually see, is to interrogate the thoughts. Question them. Examine them. Pick one off the conveyor belt, so to speak, and inspect it. Is it true? Can you *really* know it's true? How do you know it's true? Who says it's true?

This seems like such a trivial thing to do, but trust me, it's not! Interrogating your thoughts like this does two things for your brain. 1) It forces your brain to pause or stop, and 2) it puts you into an observer or watcher mode that allows you to be more objective about your thoughts.

Step 3

The last step in the process is to decide, based on the interrogation of your thoughts, which ones to keep and which to toss. Remember, you're the quality control worker with all the authority. You get to decide what stays and what goes. And something I think is really powerful is if a thought isn't serving you--*even if it's true*--you can decide to think something else that might serve you better.

Let me give you an example. As a mother, I regularly give my children direction. Lately, a lot of that direction seems to center around what I want them to do with their dirty socks. I've probably said, "Put your dirty socks in the laundry," at least a hundred times at this point, yet I frequently still find dirty socks in random places around the house. Now, when that happens, my

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brain loves to offer up the thought, "I've told them a hundred times to put their dirty socks in the laundry." And that thought is very true, right? I *have* told them a hundred times. But, even though it's true, there's not really an upside to me thinking that. It's not serving me to think that, because when I do, I usually get frustrated and I don't show up as the kind of mom I want to be.

I tend to show up better when I trade that thought for something like, "It's perfectly normal for kids to forget to put away their socks. I forget to put away stuff sometimes, too. Let me find a goofy way to remind them." And speaking of goofy, I've also been thinking about how ridiculous in a hilarious way this is. I mean, really! It's pretty crazy that I've reminded them so many times and they keep leaving their socks all over the place! But, I find that when I look at it through a humorous lens like that, it's much easier to handle.

My point with that story is to remind you that your thoughts are completely optional. You don't have to continue thinking the first thought or thoughts your brain offers you. You can choose to think something different. Something more useful. Something better. And that is so powerful!

So let's quickly recap the three steps.

- Step 1: Dump out your brain. Write down the thoughts in your head.
- Step 2: Interrogate your thoughts. Examine them and ask if they're really true.
- Step 3: Decide which thoughts are serving you and should stay, and which thoughts need to go.

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Now, to help you with that process, I've created a free worksheet that'll take you through all three steps. And you can grab it in the show notes for this episode by going to kerimartinez.com/1. In future episodes we'll look at other ways you can manage your brain and different tools you can use to gain authority over your thoughts. And that, my friends, is the key to creating the life and results you really want.

All right, that's it for this inaugural episode. Thank you so much for listening! If you'd like to see show notes and a transcript, go to kerimartinez.com/1. That's k-e-r-i-m-a-r-t-i-n-e-z dot com forward slash one. That's where you can grab the free worksheet I mentioned, so head over there and check that out.

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