



Episode 118: THINK LIKE A GIRL

This is the *Become an Unstoppable Woman* podcast with Lindsay Preston Episode 118, Think Like a Girl.

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Welcome to the *Become an Unstoppable Woman* podcast, the show for goal-getting, fear-facing women for kicking ass by creating change. I'm your host, Lindsay Preston. I'm a wife, mom of two, and a multi-certified life coach to women all over the world. I've lived through enough in life to know that easier doesn't always equate to better. We can't fear the fire, we must learn to become it. On this show, I'll teach you how to do just that. Join me as I challenge you to become even more of the strong, resilient, and powerful woman you were meant to be. Let's do this.

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Hi there, Ms. Unstoppable, welcome to another episode of the show. Today I am interviewing Dr. Tracy Packiam Alloway. She is an award winning psychologist, professor, author, and TEDx speaker. She has published over 15 books and over 100 scientific articles on the brain and memory. Dr. Alloway shares her insights about the brain with Fortune 500 companies, and her research has been used and the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, and *Bloomberg*.

As a teaching professor and in her private psychology practice space in Jacksonville, Florida, Dr. Alloway helps many women learn how to use their uniquely female brains to live their best lives. Dr. Alloway just published a book called *Think Like a Girl* where she is talking about the 10 unique strengths of a woman's brain and how to make them work for you. When I was introduced to Dr. Tracy Alloway, I knew I had to have her on the show, because we're all about the brain here, and how to maximize our mindset in essence to get the life that we want.

I loved her research. She's been running a research lab-- I can't get it out, for decades now, about the differences between men's and women's brains and what she has found is pretty interesting. You're going to gain a lot of awareness today just from the interview alone. Now, of course, I suggest you go get her book, but start off with this interview, and really be in a headspace where you can take in what you're going to learn today, because she has



a lot to offer on this interview. Again, you're going to gain so much awareness that you're going to be able to start to make some big changes in your life because of it. Without further ado, here's my interview with Tracy Packiam Alloway.

Tracy, thank you so much for coming on the *Become an Unstoppable Woman* podcast. I have been reading your book, *Think Like a Girl*, for the past few weeks now and I can't wait to share it with my audience. I'd love to just start from the beginning. What does think like a girl mean?

Dr. Tracy Packiam Alloway: I really like the idea of think like a girl because a lot of times doing something like a girl has a very negative connotation. You throw like a girl, you make decisions like a girl, you're emotional like a girl, and I really wanted to explore and flip it on the head a little bit and look at the science behind how a girl's brain, how the female brain actually works in a lot of different areas, and ultimately, how can we have an appreciation of the uniqueness of our brain and lean into some of those strengths.

Lindsay: We're going to get into all the different sections in which the women's brain or the girl's brain is different. Let's just jump in, Tracy, because we've got different things in your book. The first is decision making. How is the female brain different in this area?

Dr. Alloway: This for me was the first chapter I wrote, and it was so fascinating, Lindsay, because you hear all the time, women make emotional decisions, or we're emotional when we make decisions, and you always hear emotions playing a role. I wanted to really test this. In my own research lab, I gave my participants, both male and female, a very difficult dilemma. It's called a trolley dilemma. It's where you have the situation where this train or this trolley is hurtling at you, it's going to injure five people, but you can save the day if you flip the track that the train is on, it will still injure one person but you'll save five.

This dilemma is not one I created, it's very well known, it's even made its way in some popular TV shows, but what's interesting about this dilemma is that other researchers when they look to see how people respond to it, they show that heightened stress, that worry. Although it sounds so artificial, and you may be thinking, "This is never a time in which I have to make these kinds of difficult decisions," we actually respond in a very realistic way. We show that elevated heart rate, that stress response, because we're taking this very seriously. It seemed like an ideal dilemma to present to my participants to understand a little bit about how we make our decisions.

Now, women, again, are often perceived as making an emotional decision, they may say things like, "I can't do it. It's too difficult." What I found was that women say those things



because it's stemming from a desire to protect. We are wired where we want to protect, and we want to avoid harm. On the surface, what appears as a weak or an emotional decision is actually coming from a really powerful place, whereas women were saying, "We don't want to cause harm to anyone. We want to protect as many people as we can."

Now what was interesting in my lab is that if you're an individual, and you want to flip that switch, so we know that there's two decision making pathways, there's a cold decision making pathway, which is housed in the front of your brain, your prefrontal cortex, that's the rational decision making center, and there's a hot decision making center, the emotional decision making Center, which is your amygdala, your brain's emotional center.

I found that you can flip the switch simply by sticking your hand in a bucket of ice. The reason this is so powerful is because that ice introduces a stress response and your brain responds, your amygdala specifically responds by saying, "Oh, my goodness, I'm in some pain, acute, a small amount of pain, I better respond by kicking in my fight or flight or freeze mechanism right now." This leaves the front of your brain, your call decision making center available to actually consider the different possibilities and make a rational decision.

Let's put this in a real world context. Let's say you've been headhunted and offered a job in a new city. Your first thought is, "Well, I can't leave my boss. What about my team? I don't want to let anyone down. We've worked so hard together." Here we are, we see this mechanism of wanting to protect, not wanting to cause harm kicking in, and so it may be difficult to make a decision that is not emotional as a result.

If you find yourself in that position, and you want to be able to explore other possibilities, find a bucket of ice and stick your hand in it for as little as one minute and it'll flip that switch in your brain.

Lindsay: Wow! I remember reading that in the book, but hearing you talk about it is so interesting. It's so funny, because my daughter, just weeks before I started your book, Tracy, she brought up the trolley analogy and she's like, "Mom, what would you do?" I'm like, "Wait a second, give me more details. What are the ages of the participants and all that." I feel like I got to experience it before and that was where my brain went was like, "Okay, tell me the ages. How much harm is going to be created between the two?" Tracy, let's back up for a second, tell us about your research lab a little bit and how you built that to get your research?



Dr. Alloway: I've been doing this research for a decade and a half or over that. What I found, what really struck me is, as I was beginning to look at different scientific studies, you typically see the research as a broad brushstroke, a one size fits all. "Well, we all act this way, we all think this way." Even in my own lab, I began to see nuances in some of the patterns that, of course, they are some universal themes in the way in which we think and act, but there are also differences and some of them are hardwired, but that doesn't mean they're deterministic, we can still change, and some of them are culturally driven.

That's why I wanted to address this idea of the myths that we believe, the stories that either we hear or we tell ourselves, and I wanted to explore the truth behind that. Is it really true that our brain does this or that? These things that we tell ourselves. In my own lab, I've had a chance to explore a lot of these issues from decision making, to mental health, to memory, and so on. It's been a lot of fun and I love getting a chance to work with different students and professors as well and we're always very hands on in lab, and get a chance to explore a lot of these issues together.

Lindsay: When you were in your lab, did you go in intensely saying, "Let's figure out the differences between a male and a female brain," or did it just come out that way?

Dr. Alloway: It did come out that way for a lot of the time. It wasn't even something that I set on that this was my framework, this is what I want to explore, but as part of the research, you ask for demographic questions, like your age, your geographical region, and of course, do you identify as male or female? That gave us a great opportunity and some of my data sets have over 4,000 people. This is huge wealth of research that I had coming from my lab, which gave me a great opportunity to look under the hood to see how are brains working with respect to all these different questions.

Lindsay: Then, going back to decision-making, you said women are making decisions because they want to avoid harm. What is the male brain? How are they making decisions?

Dr. Alloway: Typically, that stress response is very interesting. It can also flip the switch in them. I used, in the book, two different kinds of stresses. I use that physical stress, which is that bucket of ice, but I also use what's called the cognitive stress, which is where I asked my participants to count backwards from 100, but in 6's. 100, 94, 88. Sometimes I get to speak, pre-COVID a little bit more often, but sometimes it's Fortune 500 companies and we'll do this activity and you can hear that sigh in the room the minute I say, we're going to count backwards by sixes. You hear this groan like, "Man, I can't do this already."



We know that it's a stressful activity. In my lab, I also took a skin response where I can measure the body's physiological response to stress. I know that not only was this activity set up to be stressful, but participants were responding in a way physiologically as a stressful situation. This also is one way that you can flip the switch. Again, if you can't find ice anywhere or you just want to be warm and you don't want to feel that bit of cold, even a cognitive stressor can flip that switch in your brain as well.

Lindsay: Wow, that's so interesting. That's decision-making for women. Let's talk about love. What did you find here, Tracy?

Dr. Alloway: This is very interesting. I have nieces, I've two boys and my brother has nieces too. We get a lot of chance to talk about-- they're at their teenage years. They got back from a dance and they had these fun conversations about the boys that they like and so on. It's really interesting that I often hear, "Oh, I'm looking for this type of person. They have to be X or fY. They have to have a certain job or a certain level of income," and so on. Certainly, the research supports that this is a universal thing. Women tend to look for status of financial stability in a male partner, and males tend to look for attractiveness in a female partner. Again, this seems to be true across different cultures. There's multiple studies that have 1000 people doing this survey.

Well, what I wanted to find out is, how is our brain wired, and is this really the best approach, the best type that we should be focused on? Instead of looking at these stereotypical types, if you will, what research suggests is that there is a specific personality type that could be a better indicator of relationship satisfaction. You may have heard of the big five personality traits, things like extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness. What researchers have identified and I talk about in the chapter is that conscientiousness is the number one indicator of successful relationships. Success is defined as satisfaction that the couple rates how satisfied they are.

Now, the interesting thing about conscientiousness, some of you listeners are thinking, "I have no idea what that actually means." It's typically that you're hardworking, that you're motivated to see a goal to the end. A simple indicator that you may have heard thrown around is, is the room clean? Is your bed made? Those kinds of signs indicate that they are attentive to keeping the environment around them tidy, neat, and so on. These are some of the indicators.

Now, what's interesting is that when we're younger in our 20s, conscientiousness may look like signs of perfectionism or even being a workaholic because they're so goal-driven, they're so conscientious and wanting to achieve a certain outcome that it may actually be



a turnoff for some people or negative. The good news is that trait does mellow out over age, and specifically, as couples who are in longer-term relationships, conscientiousness ranks really high in what's an important trait.

That shows as a couple, as a unit, the two individuals are motivated to work hard at that relationship. Those are the partners, the pairs that are saying, "Hey, what can we do to keep this strong? What can we do to make each other content, and satisfied, and happy?" They're attentively conscientious in working towards that. That is a very interesting type to look for simply because it may not appear attractive to some people, especially in the early stages.

Really, sometimes we want someone more, even slightly neurotic because those are the musicians, the artistic types are the ones that are a bit more interesting to us. In fact, again, research studies show that that particular personality type is the biggest indicator in the early relationships as a negative. People who are highly neurotic in the early stages of relationship, that's a good indicator that that's probably a sign that relationship is not there for the long-term.

Lindsay: Wow, it goes back to earlier in your 20s and even 10 years, you're like, "oh, the bad boy. Oh, he's handsome." I had somebody I dated from my college years who was like that. Then, by the mid to late 20s, I was like, "Oh, this isn't the qualities that I want moving forward." How interesting? Let me just make sure I understand, Tracy. What you found in the research obviously is that that trait is for long-term relationships, for the success. How is a woman's brain different from a male's in regards to love? Is that it of looking for that?

Dr. Alloway: Yes, I actually have two chapters on that. I talk about relationships in two parts. One the attraction, which is what we just covered, and the second is what I call bonding, the long-term side of things. This is where your attachment style plays a really big role. A lot of women have what's called an anxious attachment style. That may appear as, "Oh, I can't trust anyone," but they also conversely, while they say they can't trust anyone, they have this desire, this need for someone to be in their life. It's almost this push and pull.

A lot of it does have to do with our relationships with our parents when we were younger because it sets the framework for how we think relationships should work. The way in which we bond with our parents is the way in which we think, "Oh, that's how we should take it forward in a romantic relationship as well." If your parent would give you affection sometimes, but pull away other times, then we learned this anxious style where we think, "Have I done enough? Have I done too much? Have I made them angry?"



We bring that same perspective into our relationship. Here, the tricky thing is that women with an anxious attachment style tend to seek out an avoidant romantic partner. The kind of partner that is hard to get the challenge that, "Oh, I got to work hard," because that is the kind of relationship pattern that we grew up with with a parent. That parent may have been avoiding. We work extra hard to do something to please them, to get their affection, and we think that is how romantic relationships should work too. That is a style that we see more prevalent in women.

Again, the whole ethos or the whole purpose of me wanting to write this book is twofold. One, to create awareness. It's not to say that it's right or wrong the way in which our brain is working, but to create an awareness. With that awareness comes in appreciation. If you know, this is how you are setting the template for seeking out a romantic partner, what can you do to adjust that? What can you do to accommodate that, to tweak that instead of being the person saying, "Why do I always end up with the wrong person? Why do I end up with this person that's hurting me, that's pulling away the minute I try to get close."

That may be because your idea of closeness is manifesting as an anxious attachment, that high level of need, and you're seeking out a partner that has the complete opposite. That avoidant that's thinking this is way too much, and it's not a good combination. That understanding, that awareness can really be a powerful mechanism for you to say, "Well, what can I do to find satisfaction in my relationships to find a partner that is best suited to my needs?"

Lindsay: It's amazing how much attachment style impacts our life. Isn't it, Tracy? I've done so much research, and it goes everywhere. I didn't realize that women had more anxious. I just knew that 50% are secure and 50% are the unsecure or insecure. That's interesting. That goes back to us as women tend to be more empathetic and conditioned to please. Something goes wrong, "What did I do?" Right?

Dr. Alloway: Yes, exactly.

Lindsay: Let's talk about intelligence and the women's brain. Tell me about that. What did you find here?

Dr. Alloway: Yes, this is a really fun one. Again, from my research lab, because a lot of my research interests and expertise is in the area of memory, Alzheimer's, ADHD, autism, and so on. I was curious how this came to play in children when we look at lying behavior. Now, we all tell lies. We know all the stats. Maybe every one in four statements is a non-truth, if you want to frame it positively, or a lie. I wasn't so interested in the frequency, I



was more interested in the types of lies that we tell. From my research, I found that this is a good sign, a good indicator of intelligence.

We know that when you are telling a lie, it does involve this kind of active memory. You have to think of what you want to say, your story versus the truth. You have to keep in mind what you think the listener knows, what you've already told them. You don't want to contradict yourself. There's a lot of moving parts and certainly in my research, I found the more intelligent children were better liars. The good news is as a parent if you have a young one that's given to lie telling, it's not a negative thing. They do grow out of it because social pressure and so on. They're typically not encouraged for telling lies.

We do know that there are two types of lies. There's what's called anti-social lies, which are the lies to protect yourself. If you think of it from a perspective of a child, "Did you eat the cookie." They know they're not supposed to. They don't want to get in trouble. "No, I didn't eat the cookie." "Why they're crumbs in your face?" "Well, I don't know." That's the antisocial lie. They want to protect themselves.

The prosocial liars, "Did your brother or sister eat that cookie?" They may lie to protect their sibling. "No." They know they're going to get in trouble. They may not get another cookie. They'll say, "No, one ate the cookie. You just forgot how many you made." That's a prosocial lie. Other researchers have found that as adults, women are more likely to tell prosocial lies to protect someone else compared to men.

Now, I wanted to trace this back in childhood. Again, this idea is are we hardwired, or is it something that we learn? In my lab, I was looking at four-year-olds. The game was very simple. They just had to pick up a little paper ball, throw it in a basket. The researcher's back was turned, so they could, in theory, run up and just put the ball in the basket and no one would know. They were asked, "How many balls did you make into the basket." They got a prize if they made more baskets, so they were incentivized almost to cheat a little bit.

Then the researcher would do the same thing where they would throw balls in the basket, and of course, the researcher would cheat and put the balls in the basket. We would ask a child, "Did that researcher make 8 out of 10 baskets? Did they really do that great of a job there?" We found the girls would be more likely to tell lies to protect the researcher than the boys in our studies. We find the same pattern even in young girls that we want to protect our tribe. We want to protect those around us. We're looking out, and we are more likely to tell a prosocial lie.



Lindsay: Wow. I read that in the book too, but hearing you explain it, new patterns are coming out in all of these different areas of this protection mechanism. Yes.

Dr. Alloway: Yes, exactly.

Lindsay: Tell us about the feeling part of the women's brain?

Dr. Alloway: This was a really interesting section of the book to write. I talk a lot about happiness and also altruism. With mental health, the myth there that I wanted to address is, is it true that women are more likely to experience depression than men, and of course, there are cultural reasons for that. We're more open in talking about our feelings. We're certainly rewarded for talking about our feelings more even at a young age, so there's less of a stigma in discussing that.

I wanted to look from a chemistry perspective, a neurological perspective, what's really happening. I found a couple of things. One, research shows us that we have three times more receptors in our brain that are attentive to stress compared to men. It's almost like we have a spotlight in our brain that's saying, "Oh, my goodness, this is happening," and we have this elevated stress response as a result.

Now, again, as I mentioned in the beginning, this is not in any way deterministic. Just because our brain is set up this way, that doesn't mean we can't overcome that, and that leads us to the second part. I found very different mechanisms in how we can protect our brain against depressive symptoms and tendencies. Now here, this is a study done. I had 3000 plus people, and I was looking at men and women asking them different kinds of questions about precursors. What happens before you actually get to that point of depression where you feel like, "I can't get out of bed. Nothing is bringing me joy anymore. What's going on here?"

Again, I was using a non-clinical sample. These were individuals who were self-reporting feeling these symptoms of depression. Now for the men, I found that if they had a sense of agency, they felt in control, "Hey, I can do this. I can make a change. This is what's in my power to manage and so on." That for them was a buffer, a protective mechanism against depression.

For women, it was very different. For them, the anti-buffer, if you will, was what's called rumination. This idea that they have this cycle in their brain. They can't get out of it. We've all been there. You go to an event you're like, "Why did I say that? If only I said this instead and--" We just can't step out of that loop that keeps playing in our brain. This is back to



this idea that in part, our brain is wired to focus on that thing. The tip, the takeaway that I give in the chapter was that just changing one word can help rewire your brain. Instead of saying, "Yes, but--" Someone might say, "Yes, but at least you got the interview." "Yes, but, I didn't say the things I wanted to say." Just that negative, that rumination back again. Change the but to an and. "Yes, and, I got to share my expertise. Yes, and I got to network."

We know from brain imaging studies, the part of the brain that focuses on optimism and gratitude is our Broca's area, our language center which is in the left side of the brain. There's a real power in articulating the things that you're grateful for, that optimistic perspective. Studies show that it's like a muscle. The more we say yes, and in a manner of gratitude and optimism, the more activation we see in our brain. The easier it is for us to view a situation and say, "You know what, that is a positive thing. I'm really grateful this happened because A, B, and C."

Lindsay: That's my wheelhouse, Tracy, is mindset work and gratitude is one of the tools that we use in my coaching program especially with my ongoing clients every week they have to show up and give their wins, their gratitude, and a brag. I do it too. The more I do it, the more you find it, and the less rumination that happens. Any time you're shifting those really basic thoughts, it makes such a huge difference. I love hearing that. I hope everybody listening really takes that one in. It makes a difference. How interesting is that women, they ruminate more.

Dr. Alloway: Yes, exactly. That's a great example of sometimes our brain is set up differently and that affects the way in which we view the world. It's not just a cultural change, but it is something in which our chemistry is. Again, none of this is deterministic which for me is so encouraging.

Lindsay: Yes, for sure. The last section is being a leader as a woman. Tell us about this.

Dr. Alloway: This is also a really fun one to write, both as a woman in academia which is a very male-dominated environment typically. You do hear a lot and I've heard colleagues. As I was starting to read an interview of the women that are professional and good at what they do, you often hear this, "Oh, well, I was told to act more like a man. I was told to dress more like a man, talk more like a man." I wanted to explore, "Is this really true. Do we have to adopt male or masculine leader traits in order to be perceived as an effective and successful leader?"

Two pieces came out. One was a study done by other researchers. They did a similar survey. They defined masculine traits as being upfront, always needing to be right, setting



the tone loudly. This is how the researchers define masculine traits. They found that when women adopted these types of behaviors, their male counterparts actually perceive them as ineffective leaders, so there was a backlash. It was almost like, "Hey, there's a disconnect. We're seeing you up here, but you're acting this way and we just don't think you're a good leader." That was the first interesting thing that I was reading from all the scientific research.

The second came out of my own lab. There's two different types of leadership styles. There's something called transactional which is goal-directed where, "You've got a deadline. Let's get it done. Let's focus on the goal," and there's something called transformative, you're collaborative. You want everyone's ideas on deck. You want to have that interaction. I think the key thing to remember with leadership styles is that it's exactly that, it's a style.

You're not born as one type of leader or another, and one type is not better or worse or right or wrong, it's whatever is most effective for the situation you're in. Sometimes you do have a deadline, and you have to be a transactional leader. Other times, it's a creative project. You want all these different opinions, and you want to be collaborative and transformative.

I think the first thing to keep in mind is that it's a style that we adopt for whatever is best for that situation. The second thing I found is that, when women would adopt a style that was not authentic to themselves, they actually reported higher levels of stress, and they were more likely to experience burnout. I think that as a leader, we may feel-- and this is culturally driven, we may feel a push to adopt these traits that are not authentic to our own leadership style. The key here to remember is, look at the situation. What leadership kind of style does this call for? That is better for your perception as a leader as well as for your own mental health as well.

Lindsay: Yes, so true. It goes back to what I'm always teaching, Tracy, is authenticity, being authentic. I love hearing the research of when you are authentic that's where you can shine as a leader as a woman. If we're taking on all these masculine traits, it actually backfires on us.

Dr. Alloway: Yes. Exactly.

Lindsay: Trust our intuition which women tend to be better at. I don't know if the research backs that up, but they tend to be more intuitive. There's so much to chew on with us.



Obviously to go get the book and learn even more, *Think Like a Girl*. When is it out, Tracy? When is it available?

Dr. Alloway: It is out May 4th. It's coming right up, and I'm really excited.

Lindsay: Awesome. Obviously, they can find it on Amazon and everywhere else, yes?

Dr. Alloway: Everywhere books are sold.

Lindsay: Awesome. What's your contact info, Tracy, if they want to follow you and learn more?

Dr. Alloway: I would love to connect with your listeners. I have a website, tracyalloway.com. Lots of fun videos up there about the brain and how it works. I would love to connect with them on social media, Dr. Tracy Alloway. I'm on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, all the fun spots.

Lindsay: Wow, Tracy. Thank you so much for teaching us about our brains. I was so excited to have you. I'm a big neuroscience nerds. This is totally up my alley. I know everybody gains so much. Thank you.

Dr. Alloway: Thanks for having me, Lindsay. It was so fun getting to chat about this with you.

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