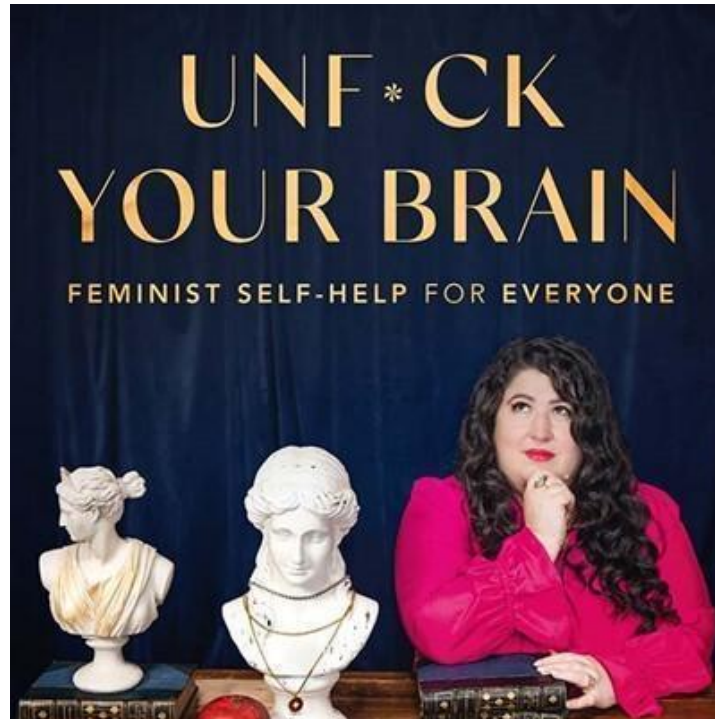


# UFYB 250: The Difference Intersectional Coaching Makes



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## **UFYB 250: The Difference Intersectional Coaching Makes**

Welcome to *Unf\*ck Your Brain*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and founder of The School of New Feminist Thought. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence, and create a life on your own terms. One that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Hello my chickens. How are we all doing here in August? I cannot believe it is mid-August. I don't understand how time works which to be fair, many physicists on a deep level would say none of us really understand how time works. So, I want to talk to you guys today about a really good question that I got asked recently. And it made me realize that I had kind of never fully shared my philosophy of coaching with all of you. I mean I have obviously shared many of my perspectives on coaching and my thoughts about coaching.

There are so many episodes of this podcast, it's kind of unbelievable to think that I have been doing this podcast for five years now. And we've put out an episode every week and sometimes bonus episodes too. So that's kind of mind blowing. But obviously as I have developed my own work and been coaching and teaching, and then created my advance certification in feminist coaching. I have really kind of built out, and fleshed out, and developed, and created my own coaching framework, my own intellectual endeavor, my own body of work.

And so today what I want to do is kind of explain to you what that is and why I think it's so important to understand how to coach from this perspective. So, I often call myself a feminist mindset coach and I think I am a feminist mindset coach. But the kind of coaching framework that I have developed is something that I call intersectional coaching. So, I owe a huge debt in this work to Kimberlé Crenshaw who is an incredible academic, law professor, thinker, thought leader genius of our time who coined the term and the concept of intersectionality.

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And she uses that term to mean the ways in which different marginalized identities or communities experience different systems of oppression in ways that intersect. So, a sort of flat one dimensional way of understanding oppression, or marginalization, or systems of bias and discrimination, or whatever would be kind of along just one axis, like you are just a woman, you're just a person of color, you're just a person of size, you're just disabled, whatever it is.

And a lot of the problems in early feminist movement and something we still struggle with today in the feminist movement came from that kind of flat analysis of, well, we're all women and so that commonality should transcend anything else or that's all we need to understand things. Any system that is sort of like there's one defining characteristic that organizes everything, so like a flat understanding of it's all patriarchy, or a flat understanding of it's all capitalism, or a flat understanding of it's all racism.

That's the sort of one dimensional way of understanding the complex dynamics in the world. And what Kimberlé Crenshaw terms intersectionality is a way of understanding that people live in intersecting identities, and communities, and marginalized experiences. So, for instance if you are a fat woman you are experiencing misogyny, sexism, but also fat phobia.

If you are a Black woman, a woman of color which is where Kimberlé Crenshaw started with this work, you are not just experiencing sexism or misogyny, but you're also experiencing racism and the specific kinds of discrimination, and bias, and oppression that you experience not just by virtue of being a woman, not just by virtue of being let's say a Black person, or an Asian person, or a Latino person. But the specific kind of discrimination you experience as a Latino woman, or as a Black woman, or as an Asian woman, there is this intersectionality.

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So that it's not unidimensional, there are actually sort of specific forms of bias, or stereotyping, or oppression, or discrimination that people who exist in the intersections of different marginalized identities will experience. Sometimes there's even a specific term for that, misogynoir which is the sort of discrimination bias and oppression that Black women experience specifically because and as Black women. So that is a very obviously simplified version of understanding what the concept of intersectionality means as a political analysis.

And when I started coaching, and getting coaching, and learning about coaching, getting certified as coaching, I really saw that this perspective was just kind of missing, that a lot of coaching is taught as here are tools that will work the same on anybody. And I understand why that is and there's a couple of reasons, like everything, it's a complex system.

One is that coaching has historically been dominated by middle to upper class thin white women, mostly Christian also. And so, they developed tools that made sense to them and maybe didn't always have the perspective of other people's lived identities or experiences. And there is also the case that when you are teaching someone the basics of something you want to keep it kind of simple so that they can understand the basics. And there's a time and a place for learning the basics.

But if you really want to learn to coach more effectively and at a deeper level you really have to understand how to coach from this intersectional perspective. Because the truth is that there's really no such thing as coaching from a sort of purely clean space where your own lived experience and your opinions, and your analysis, and your awareness of the world doesn't impact the way that you coach.

And this is sort of the level of sophistication that I think is required for us to uplevel the coaching industry and for this field of study and work to be at it's

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most powerful in helping people. I believe that coaching is really practical philosophy and I have a whole episode about that. And as practical philosophy it needs to be able to speak to people of different lived experiences, from different backgrounds, with different identities, who have experienced different things.

And so, for me intersectional coaching is all about learning myself and then teaching others how to do that. Giving up this myth that all coaching tools apply the same to everyone and that you can coach anyone without having more context and understanding of their world and how it might be different from your world. It's really not sort of black and white, it's not on or off. It's not this tool works for everyone or it works for no one. Many of the coaching tools that we are taught apply to everyone are super helpful tools.

But it's sort of like if you were trying to be a fine dining chef and you only had one knife. You could definitely cut some stuff up, you can make some meals but you would not be able to make a fine dining level of cuisine with just one knife and no other tools. And the same is true for understanding coaching and understanding intersectionality and the way that different systems impact different people. And the way that other people's experiences may be different from your own.

And this is especially important if you want to be a feminist coach because obviously I talk a lot about socialization and how we are taught to think. And I talk a lot about that from the perspective of how does patriarchy teach women to think about themselves. But that's not monolithic. Different groups of women who live in other different marginalized identities or communities are impacted in different ways. The message is heard in different ways or they are given different messages. There are lots of messages in our society that are different for different groups of people.

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And so, in order to really understand that you have to have some awareness and knowledge of different systems of bias that you may not really have thought of because they haven't impacted you directly. You have to understand that for instance encouraging a senior C-Suite thin white woman to express her anger in a certain way or coaching her through that is going to look very different than how a woman of color, or a Black woman in America has been socialized and has experience or repercussions of expressing anger.

Very different life experiences, very different socialization, if you don't have any awareness of that you're really not able to coach people who are different from you effectively. Now, this is obviously always a working progress. Every time I teach my advanced certification in feminist coaching I solicit feedback from my students. And every year I hear about a bunch of shit that I missed. And that's how it should be, I'm not perfect, I don't know everything obviously. And I want to hear, what did I miss? What did I leave out?

And every year that curriculum gets better and better because the diverse students who go through tell me where my blind spots are and what I've missed. So, it's not about perfection but it's about at least making the effort. And this is one of the kind of subtle things the patriarchy does and gets in our brains, and fucks us up, is that women are socialized to believe that they have to be perfect.

And the more marginalized identities you live in the more you have that pressure of proving your perfection just to be allowed to live and be allowed to think you have any worth or value in the world, or even any physical safety in the world. And so, when we become coaches or we want to become coaches, that can actually hold us back because we get so overwhelmed by the concept of the idea of trying to learn about all these

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different systems, or experiences we don't know about, or perspectives that we don't share.

And we're afraid of doing it wrong, and so then we just want to kind of shut it down and hide. But a lot of what for me intersectional coaching is about is understanding that there's no way to know it all. There's always going to be some aspect of someone's identity or experience that you don't know about. But you can either try, you can learn about some of it and try to get better and better at making space for that and understanding it and empowering your clients.

Intersectional coaching is not about you being the expert, knowing about all the intersections. It's about you knowing enough to know when you don't know something. So, it's both about learning information that you just may not have learned, learning about perspectives, and socialization, and historical pieces, and trends, and all these sorts of just sort of facts, and theories, and ideas that you don't know that make your coaching deeper.

But it's also about learning how to collaborate with your clients so that there is really space for them to express to you when you are not being reflective of a reality that they live in. When you do have a blind spot, when you are maybe not contemplating something important about their identity, their experience, their community, the history behind it that is impacting your coaching.

So intersectional coaching for me there's intersectionality in multiple different ways. It's both understanding the intersections of different oppressive systems that you can show up better as a coach. And there's the intersection of you and the client. One of the things I teach a lot in my advanced certification is a non-hierarchical coaching practice where your job is not to tell the client how things are, or tell the client what to do, or tell the client what to think. You're not the authority.



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You may be a teacher, a guide, a partner in their self-discovery, their self-empowerment, their self-actualization. That's actually the job of a feminist coach and of an intersectional coach in my view. So, if you are a coach listening to this or thinking about being a coach, this is something to really be aware of when you are choosing how you're going to get trained, or what you're going to learn, or where you're going to study, who you're going to learn from.

Being aware that there are a lot of different lived experiences, and identities, and systems of oppression in the world and understanding how to navigate those in the sense of understanding how to have a baseline level of education and awareness that most of us don't have about experiences other than our own. And then also understanding how to coach from a place of both support, and expertise, and humility. That you do have powerful tools that can help people from an intersectional lens. And that you don't know everything.

And you will always be learning, is always a process of getting better and better at those skills. But to me fundamentally intersectional coaching is like coaching in 3D. It is like coaching in technicolor, if you've ever watched an old movie and it'll say in technicolor because it was like they were learning how to do color movies, how to not just have it be black and white and it was such a mind blowing experience. That is what coaching from an intersectional lens is like.

All of a sudden it's like you have x-ray vision and you can see so much more deeply so much more profoundly what is impacting your clients, how they have been socialized to think in ways that may or may not match up with how you've been socialized to think. And how all of that internalized socialization of white supremacy, and patriarchy, and ableism, and heteronormativity, and all of these buzzwords, all of these systems are impacting how their brain is working.



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And when you can coach from that place that's when you can coach in technicolor. That's when you can coach in 3D. That's when you can really help people powerfully shift their lives even when they have had a different experience than you or have a different perspective from you. And for me that's important because I don't want to just be able to help people just like me. I want to be able to help anybody who wants to learn from me. And to do that I need to understand more about the variety and diversity of experiences in the world.

And I need to understand how people's intersecting identities impact what they experience in the world and how they're taught to think in their own minds. So that is what intersectional coaching is. That is kind of the short stump speech of my approach to coaching and why I think it is so important to understand and be able to coach from this intersectional perspective.

So, I want to give you an example from one of my students as well so that you can really kind of hear an example of how this changes the way that you coach, to sort of give you an idea of what it's like to go from 1D to 3D, or from black and white to technicolor. So, one of my students is a woman in tech and a woman in a sort of subfield of tech that is even more kind of male dominated than the rest. And so, she coaches other women in tech and other women in this space.

And she told this story, we went through my advanced certification and she told us this story as a kind of celebration of how this intersectional lens had helped her coach better. And so, this was the example that she gave was that she had a client and I'm of course not using the name but I'm using the story with permission. And she had a client who worked on a team at a very kind of traditional male dominated, white male dominated organization. And her client was the only woman on the team and the only woman of color on the team.

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So, she was sort of on her own in that way and her team merged with another team. And as that merger was coming up her client expressed that her belief was that she was going to end up being let go because the other team also had one woman of color on it. And that what she had seen in this institution and the way that it worked was that they would end up letting one of them go.

That the organization was so racist, and so sexist, and kind of so run by people with those mindsets that these women were going to be seen as kind of interchangeable and they would only keep one once they merged the team. And in the end that's what happened. The teams merged and they kept the other woman of color on the team and they removed my student's client. And so, here's what my student said about her experience of coaching her from the intersectional lens.

And she said, "If I had used the original coaching tools I was taught on our own I would have essentially been gaslighting her and saying that was all a neutral circumstance and that her thoughts about why it had happened were 100% subjective and optional and not necessarily true. I would have made it feel like or I would have told her that her thoughts created that result for her. If I had used just the original tools I would have been teaching her that she had created the result of being made redundant or eliminated because of her thoughts."

And what I was able to do because of having this intersectional lens was that I was able to recognize that there was another issue at play here which is that the group that she was merging into did not think she belonged. And their thoughts motivated their actions that created this circumstance in her life of having been removed from her position. So instead, I was able to take a totally different approach instead of saying that her thoughts created her not belonging or created this result. I was able to validate her experience and what had happened.

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And then we were able to really get to work. That doesn't mean that I had jumped in the pool with her. That's sort of a coaching term we use to mean when you agree with your client that all their thoughts are true and then you're basically not helpful to them because you're both swimming around in the same pool. So, my student said once she felt validated and believed that I saw her experience and that it was very possible and probable that there was racism and sexism at play then we were able to get to work.

I was able to say that her experience was real, that situation happened, and from there we were able to talk about the thoughts she wanted to create and the actions from there. And so, my student says, "The goal is always empowering people. I think this work was what was missing in my coaching practice. It seemed too black and white to say everything is just thoughts or to use just one tool to fix everything. This work, this intersectional approach reflects the grey areas that people live in."

So, it's funny that she said grey areas and I've been saying technicolor coaching but the same idea, it's not black and white. So, this is just a perfect example of how coaching from an intersectional lens gives you a much more nuanced way of helping your students with their problems. And I think that this kind of perspective is super powerful whether you are someone who feels very well versed in feminism or someone who's totally new to it.

One of my students in the advanced certification wrote to me recently that before taking the program she believed that feminism was a word used for women who hated men and were ball dashers. And that she would have been embarrassed to say she was a feminist. But she says, "Now, I can proudly say that I am with conviction." And she said that learning this intersectional approach helped her realize for herself and her female family members why they act the way they do as Chinese Asian women, that's her term she's using.

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And that her coaching business has changed in a way that amazes her. And she says, “Each time I coach a client I can see where the patriarchy and socialization has affected the limiting beliefs of each incredible women who I’m talking to no matter the size, color, ethnicity, we’ve all been affected negatively.” So, this is from somebody who came in and not identifies as a feminist but being curious enough about intersectionality or me and my work to try it. And she came out with such a deeper understanding of not just how to coach her clients but herself.

That’s partly why I am talking about this on the podcast because obviously most of you listening are not coaches. But we’re talking all the time about how we use these tools to coach ourselves and having an intersectional understanding of coaching is crucial not just for coaching your clients but for coaching yourself. And that’s true even if you’re an expert. So, one of my students, I have all of these amazing stories right now because my advanced certification students from this year have been filling out their kind of end of term projects and reflections.

And so, one of my students says, “Coming into ACFC from working in public health over a decade across sexual violence prevention and reproductive health I have pretty good knowledge and understanding of systems of oppression, bias, discrimination, equity, antiracism etc.” So, this is somebody who comfortably identified as a feminist, knew about intersectionality, had an academic and practical background in a lot of this work. But she says, “What I was missing was confidence on how to integrate this knowledge into my coaching sessions.”

And that what she realized through doing the work was that her biggest barrier was actually that she was avoiding her own lived experience and using her knowledge to coach herself more effectively. So, she says, “As a white Arab I have a lot of internalized white supremacy and a lot of shame

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and I had not had the courage to really examine that until I did the certification.”

She said, “I’ve been working on that through the certification and as a result I have noticed a much better ability to hold space for my clients where they want coaching related to any ism, discrimination, or a bias, or oppression they’ve internalized, no matter what their lived experience.” So even if you’re listening to this and you’re not a coach it doesn’t matter, if you’re listening to this podcast you want to coach yourself better and understanding intersectionality, understanding intersectional coaching is going to be what allows you to do that.

And so, I want to share a reflection from one last student to sort of give you her perspective as well, my student actually who is an acupuncturist. And she said, “Before this certification when a client would bring up their past trauma or their experiences with racism, or their disordered relationship with food and wellness, or any other ‘scary’ subjects”, and she has scary in quotes. “I would always feel really anxious in my body. This was because I was telling myself that I didn’t have the skills to help someone with these circumstances.

Now when someone brings these things to the table I feel calm and confident most of the time because I’m thinking that I have the knowledge and skills to hold space for it and coach confidently on the ‘scary stuff’”. And that is why I’m so sort of passionate about this because it’s both for the clients, and the coaches, and for all of us who are coaching ourselves. There is such a deeper level of this work that you can get access to when you understand how systems of discrimination, or bias, or oppression intersect in people’s lives.

And when you understand how that impacts there’s socialization and how they are taught to think. It’s not just about understanding the politics of it. I

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know plenty of people from my former work as a social justice advocate, and lawyer, and academic who know a shit ton about theory, and policy, and law then still are miserable, still are burnt out and aren't as effective as they want to be because you have to understand how it impacts your thinking and your socialization too.

I'll talk to you next week. Bye everyone.

If you're loving what you're learning on the podcast, you have got to come check out *The Feminist Self-Help Society*. It's our newly revamped community and classroom where you get individual help to better apply these concepts to your life along with a library of next level blow your mind coaching tools and concepts that I just can't fit in a podcast episode. It's also where you can hang out, get coached and nerd out about all things thought work and feminist mindset with other podcast listeners just like you and me.

It's my favorite place on Earth and it will change your life, I guarantee it. Come join us at [www.unfuckyourbrain.com/society](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/society). I can't wait to see you there.