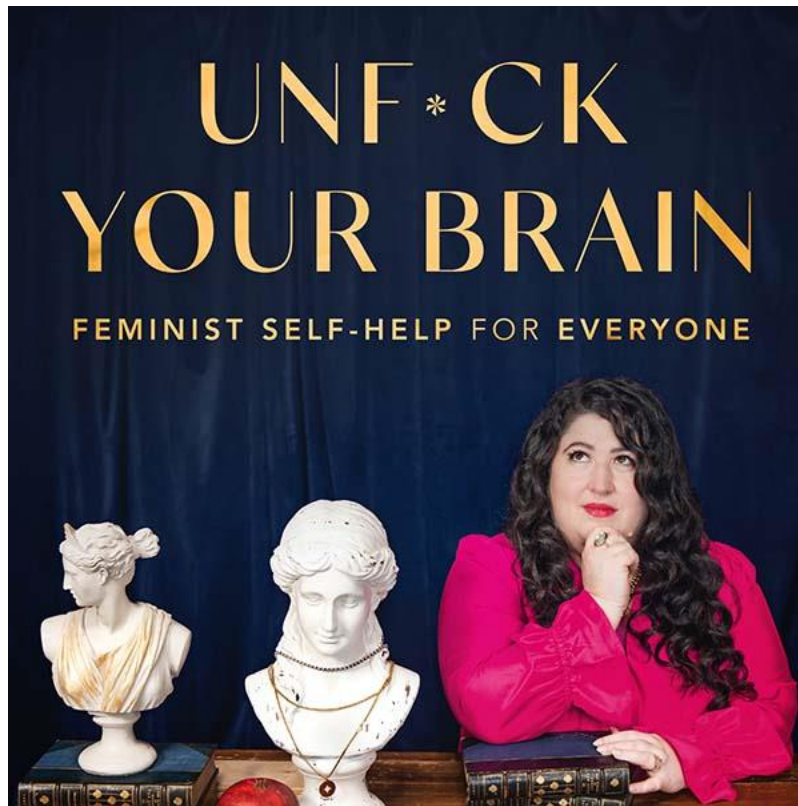


# UFYB 365: When to Choose Therapy v. Coaching



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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So, the other day I talked to a producer for a TV show who was interviewing coaches, and they were looking for people for some kind of episode on live coaching. And it became pretty clear pretty quickly that she was really looking for a reality TV type of scenario and that I was entirely too sane and balanced for her taste. In particular, she asked me several questions about coaching and therapy, and it was kind of clear that her goal was to see if I'd say something inflammatory on TV.

Was I going to say all therapy is stupid. Or coaching solves every problem no one ever needs therapy or medication or I don't believe in modern medicine or just whatever would be very dramatic? And of course, I didn't say any of that because I don't believe any of that. But it did make me think about this question because I do think that the therapy versus coaching kind of cage match that people are always trying to set up is really a red herring. And it's kind of just designed to pit people against each other unnecessarily and unhelpfully.

As is so often the case when a choice or a question is framed as either this or that, one is good, one is bad and one is right, one is wrong. You're usually missing the reality of nuance and complexity in the world. So, in this episode, I'm going to talk about how coaching and therapy can inform and support each other, and I'm going to give you a few questions to think about when you are thinking about, I'm going to give you some questions to think about when you're thinking about what kind of support to engage.

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.

Alright, my friends, let's get into this. When I first started coaching, this felt like such a thorny topic to me. It's really fascinating to reflect on how calm I

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feel about this topic now compared to how anxious I felt about this topic when I first started. And I think that's because I was a newer coach and of course, I felt nervous about this big life change I was making, and this new philosophy on how to live. And coaching had changed my life, but I didn't have a lot of experience with coaching other people yet.

So, I had that kind of newbie nervousness about whether this was all too good to be true. Am I just delusional that you can change your life and be happier? And I felt kind of defensive about my new profession because I had come from this very mainstream prestigious world that prided itself on rationality and logic. I was a reproductive rights lawyer and then I was a legal academic. And at the time, life coaching was definitely less common and seen as more unusual or out there than it is now. And I like to think that I have played a part in making it more mainstream, but when I started, it was not.

And I think that made me feel, any questions comparing therapy or coaching were somehow an attack on coaching or they were dangerous. Or I had to have some kind of perfect clear answer and I was going to get in trouble if I didn't say the exact right thing. It also felt back then to me like therapy had this kind of sacrosanct aura to it. Therapy was the long established, unimpeachable grade A standard treatment, as the therapy was like antibiotics. Just a purely scientifically studied efficacious mechanism of action that was objective and worked the same all the time.

And then coaching was some kind of new age frontier that had to prove itself against the established interest. That's how I used to kind of think and feel about it and that's how I took questions about it. And now, almost 10 years into this, I can say with certainty that all of those thoughts, my own previous thoughts, were nonsense. First of all, therapy is a word that covers a lot of different approaches, a lot of different practitioners, and a lot of ranges of modalities.

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Therapy, as a word, is used to mean everything from Freudian psychoanalysis, to cognitive behavioral therapy, to family systems therapy, to EMDR for trauma, to art therapy in the hospital, and lots of less mainstream stuff. And I'm not saying that those are all being correctly called therapy. For instance, Freudian work should be called analysis, but that's how people are using that term.

And when we talk about therapy, as a layperson, we're sort of talking about the entire field of mental health practice that is performed by people licensed in a certain way. Obviously, humans have been talking to each other about their problems since humans existed. But therapy is a kind of professional endeavor and I am using it in that loose way to mean the entire kind of psychological profession only really began in the 1880s or so. That's about 150 years ago.

And I think that's important because when people try to pit coaching and therapy against each other, they act like therapy is this very old, staid, mainstream thing that is just static and true and proven beyond a doubt like it's algebra. And that coaching is this wild west industry. But when psychotherapy started, it was not mainstream either. It was itself once a new-fangled thing. And relevant to what we talk about on this podcast, it was mostly done by white men and it was often explicitly Christian in nature.

So obviously therapy now is done by people of all different backgrounds and is not Christian at all most of the time. But it's just important to understand where this field and industry started. At the time, when we're talking late 1880s, this is when Freudian and Jungian analysis were created. Those were common. And some of those have stuck with us. And also, at the time there were practices like phrenology, which claim to tell your character by studying the shape of your head. It's profoundly racist and eugenicist.

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So, any new field, it's going to have a range of stuff in it, some of which is useful, some of which is not. That was true of therapy, continues to be true of therapy. It's not only new fields that are like that, also, true of coaching. And even after psychotherapy became more established, treatments like lobotomies were routinely used up until the 1950s and hysteria was often diagnosed to women at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who found anything about life as a woman without any rights to be objectionable.

So, I'm not saying any of this to say that modern forms of therapy are not valuable or useful. They absolutely can be. And therapy now has a licensing system and more regulations than the coaching world does for sure. But I think it's really important to sort of take therapy off this weird pedestal that we place it on because it makes us misevaluate what we need.

If you take any field of human endeavor and you give it sort of unearned sacrosanct status then you don't question, you don't sort of analyze and you don't use your own discernment to see, well, what's helpful for me. Therapy means a million different things with a million different kinds of practitioners. And you have to use your own discernment to decide if you are going to go to therapy, what kind of therapy, which therapist to go to. What you want to get out of it.

So, I think especially because women are so socialized to see authorities as being always right and our job being to please authorities. We really need to be conscious and aware that coaching is not sacred and your coach is not your guru. And therapy is not sacred and your therapist is not your boss or a parent or a person who knows everything you should do. Therapy is a field of human ideas just like coaching. And therapy is definitely farther along in maturation as a professional field than coaching is.

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It's still a big tent with a lot of different ideas in it about how the human mind works, what causes mental and emotional suffering, and how to resolve it. There are modalities of therapy that have contradicting belief systems about how the human mind works and how to help people. We just want to take therapy and coaching for that matter, but this more often happens with therapy, off of this more official and always respectable pedestal. And again, there are incredible therapists who change lives, 100%, absolutely. And there are shitty therapists, too.

And there are incredible coaches who change lives and there are shitty coaches too. And obviously what makes someone incredibly shitty is our thought about them but you get what I'm saying. No field has the lock on human understanding or unhelpful resources. And again, therapy means a zillion different things, just like coaching. If you say I'm getting a coach, a fitness coach or a nutrition coach, a creativity block coach, an anxiety coach, athletic coach, totally huge range of modalities, theories of the mind, theories of behavior change, ways of working with you.

It can mean so many different things and it really depends on what you need. Someone could go to Freudian analysis and just find that retraumatizing, expensive, and then they could do EMDR and feel much better. Or someone might find that going to Jungian analysis four times a week in an old school way unlocks the creative block they've had for years. Completely depends on the person, the modality and what clicks for them.

So, one last therapy fact I find fascinating is that there are studies showing that the most powerful predictor of therapeutic success is not the modality, but the rapport with the therapist. And in fact, very different modalities can create pretty similar outcomes. So, to quote one of these studies, study after study has shown that the quality of the relationship between client and therapist is the only reliable and the most powerful predictor of a positive outcome.

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So, skill matters, modality is relevant, but what's called the therapeutic alliance, the connection between the therapist and the client is the most important factor. What that means is there isn't one right way of doing therapy, one right method that will solve everybody's problems all the time. It really much more depends on the rapport. And I'm not aware of a large scale study on this, but I'd say the same is true for coaching. I'm over here doing very logical, rational cognitive coaching that has been studied in medical journals.

And then there are other folks out there who are doing past life regression, alien visitor coaching or something. And they're not for my people and I'm not for their people. And it sounds nonsense to me. But I bet as long as they're holding compassionate, curious space and reflecting loving, positive rapport towards their clients that their clients are probably finding it useful.

This also should be very reassuring to you if you are a newer therapist or a newer coach and you feel unsure about your skills or you feel insecure about your experience. Just understand that showing up to be present with and build a positive rapport with your client is the most effective thing you can do. In addition to this, therapy and coaching obviously learn from and draw on each other. Cognitive based coaching tools draw a lot on cognitive behavioral theory of the brain.

And CBT techniques, even when they're practiced by therapists as a method, are also known to be something clients can practice on their own and use independently. There's not a lot of Freudian analysis on your own workbooks, but there's a lot of cognitive behavioral therapy on your own workbooks. A lot of coaching tools are based on principles and concepts developed by therapists, and meanwhile, I have a ton of therapists who listen to my podcast and recommend it to their clients.

So many people come into the Feminist Self-Help Society saying, "My therapist recommended I listen to the podcast." And I don't think that's just

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because I'm hilarious. I think it's because one of the benefits of coaching being a newer field is that it's more cutting edge sometimes. And I hear from therapists all the time that the reason they listen to my podcast or the reason they're in my programs or the reason they have taken my advanced certifications is because they just were not taught enough about gender or identity based socialization in their educational programs or in their clinical training.

They didn't learn that lens and then they happen to find my work and they find it so powerful for themselves and their clients that they want to learn it from me and apply it, even though their therapist and I'm a coach.

Knowledge can transcend those dichotomies, those discipline differences. By the way, if you're a therapist and you're listening, I want to make sure you know that I actually created a free guide about this because I get so many inquiries about it.

So, I created a free guide for therapists specifically about how to start introducing the socialization lens into your practice. And you can grab that at [feministtherapy.com](http://feministtherapy.com), all one word [feministtherapy.com](http://feministtherapy.com).

So, so far we have established therapy is not a secret practice on an altar that we can never question, neither is coaching. They are both different fields of human knowledge and study with a huge range in each of them of modalities, types of people performing the services. And that therapy is more mature as a profession in a field. It has been around longer. there's more licensing involved. It has more professional associations and requirements for training, but it's still humans trying to help other humans.

And studies show that the kind of rapport between the therapist and the patient is the most important predictor of success, which means there isn't one right method to rule them all a therapy.



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Okay, so why am I laying this all out? Because the premise I really want to establish is that there's no one correct method of therapy or coaching. And therapy and coaching are less like two separate circles and more like a Venn diagram with some overlap and some separate areas. So, there are some scenarios where therapies definitely, in my opinion, that's appropriate, and there's others where coaching may be a better fit. And then there's somewhere either one can work or they can work really well together.

Like I said, I have so many therapists who send their clients to my podcast and then those people join the Feminist Self-Help Society and then they are doing both. And the work they're doing in the society, they bring back to their therapist and vice versa. All that being said, there are some scenarios where I think it's useful to be thinking about which field, which discipline makes more sense for you. And so, after this short break, I'm going to give you some ways to think about what kind of support you need for what problems and what questions to ask yourself.

Okay, so if we've established that therapy and coaching are kind of a Venn diagram where there's overlap, but there's also some non-overlapping spaces, how do you decide what kind of support to get? So here are some of the things that I would consider and questions I would ask myself or a friend if they were thinking about this.

So, first, are you dealing with an acute mental health crisis where you might need medication, you might need intensive treatment, whether that's an inpatient or outpatient program or something similar? If so, absolutely you need therapy. You may need a psychiatrist. You may need a psychologist. You might need both. You might need a hospital, a day program, something like that. Coaching cannot replace full-featured therapeutic environments, especially inpatient or intensive outpatient ones.

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And coaches, of course, cannot prescribe medication unless they also happen to be psychiatrists. There are some psychiatrists who are coaches, but it's not that common. So, let's get that out of the way, acute mental health crisis, not appropriate for coaching on its own.

Kind of related, second, do you have any other self-harming behaviors? Maybe you're not in acute crisis, but if you have other self-harming behaviors that don't necessarily rise to the level of inpatient or outpatient intensive treatment but are dangerous or harmful to yourself or others. That's a time to seek therapeutic support.

Third, are you dealing with PTSD or CPTSD? There's pretty solid evidence that somatic tracking tools like EMDR are helpful with those symptoms, with helping the brain reorganize memory and reprocess traumatic events in a way that simply talking them through in coaching or traditional talk therapy doesn't help with. So that's another time that I would definitely say regardless of what else you're doing, you would also want to seek trauma specific therapy.

And then the fourth kind of catch all, is there anything else that's happening with you that is at a level of severity or interference with your daily functioning or potential harm to yourself or others that you need more intensive support? And if so, you should consult a therapist and/or a medical practitioner. So, it's essentially a level of, are you needing more intensive support than you can get from a coach? Or are you needing more specialized support in terms of trauma therapy, medication, being screened for more serious mental illness, etc.?

So, here's what's really important to understand. I don't believe that any of those categories necessarily and inherently mean you can't also be using coaching tools or self-coaching tools as long as the approaches work together. So, I cannot speak for the suitability of doing this with other coaching approaches or programs and sometimes it obviously is not. For

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instance, if you are being treated for an eating disorder, it is obviously not compatible to be trying to get weight loss coaching.

But for my students and all the women in the Feminist Self-Help Society, the number one thing we're working on is learning to accept our thoughts and feelings, accept ourselves and speak to ourselves with more compassion, curiosity and kindness. That's really what's underneath all of it. You want to be more productive, it turns out you need to talk to yourself differently. You want to stop crying whenever your grandma comments on your weight, it turns out you need to talk to yourself differently.

You want to find a partner after decades of searching, it turns out you need to talk to yourself differently. The story you tell yourself about who you are and what you deserve or are capable of receiving or creating is an incredibly powerful impact on your life. And that's something that everyone benefits from no matter what they're working on with whatever other practitioners.

I have people who work with me, who do have a more built out mental health care team. They have a psychiatrist. They may be on medication or getting more support for more serious mental health things. And the way they talk to themselves about their condition, about their diagnosis, about their symptoms, the way that they blame themselves and beat themselves up because society has socialized them to do that. Society has socialized them to stigmatize mental illness, including in themselves.

Society has socialized women to put their own mental health last, to believe that they're being weak if it is impacting their life or if they need to slow down or they need to prioritize themselves. You can see there's so much there, how we talk to ourselves about our diagnosis, our symptoms, the stories we tell ourselves about what they mean for us in our life. Well, I have PTSD and that means I'll never be good enough. I'll never feel okay. I'll never be able to have the career I want or have the partner I want.

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All of those narratives and stories, especially for people socialized as women who are already taught to find themselves wanting and wrong and to minimize their own mental and emotional health. Those stories are so important to work on. And if you have a great therapist, you may be working on them. But if you're going to see a psychiatrist who you see for 20 minutes once every two months where they look at your dosage and maybe adjust it. You're not getting support with that.

My baseline that I believe is that the self-compassion and the resilient thinking created by good coaching and feminist coaching or feminist self-coaching are useful for everyone. That's why this sort of trying to pit these disciplines against each other is so stupid. Changing the way you talk to yourself, is something literally every human needs help with. So, to me, learning how to coach yourself helps everyone. And then some of us need more support all the time or some of us dip in and out of needing other kinds of support at different times in our lives.

Our mental health goes up and down, big circumstances happen, we need help coping with whatever. So, for some folks, therapy and coaching can and should go together beautifully. For some folks, one or the other is going to feel more resonant at different times in their lives. If you are undergoing an acute mental health crisis, you probably don't have the mental and emotional resources to learn to coach yourself right at that moment and that's totally fine.

And if you are that person, and then your brain is telling you that you should be doing more self-coaching even when you are having a very intensive mental health crisis. Then the thought I would want to offer you to give yourself is, I just need to take care of myself right now. There's plenty of time to learn new skills in the future. See, even that is a way of talking to yourself about what's going on, that is more kind and self-compassionate. That's what having self-coaching skills does.

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That's partly why when you are not in a crisis, when you are functioning, when you are even thriving is a good time to learn how to coach yourself because you develop better self-talk. And then if your mental health does experience a challenge, you do experience a setback, something upsetting or even traumatic happens, you have a better inner dialog, you have a better relationship with yourself and you have more resilience. And so, you're able to get through that with more self-support.

Again, you may totally need external support also, but you're able to be your own friend through that in a better way. And it's normal for things to feel more resonant at different times in your life. If you feel you really need to uncover and sort out some deep seated childhood patterning that you aren't even aware of, therapy may make more sense as a primary modality for that.

On the other hand, if, like many of my students, you've been to therapy already and you feel you have some insight, but you feel frustrated about not really having tools to change your patterns actively. Or not knowing how you can move the ball forward, what can you do in between sessions to actually change how you're thinking and feeling. Then coaching may be a better fit. If you're having trouble managing your daily functioning, especially if you think you might be depressed or having clinically significant anxiety, therapy should be your first step, your first stop, both those things.

But if you're functional or even very functional, even thriving, but you want to achieve and accomplish more. Or you can't figure out why you're still unhappy despite being successful. Or you've tried other solutions for your anxiety and those haven't helped yet. Or you just want to push the limits to see how you can grow and evolve and blow your own mind. In that situation, maybe coaching is right for you.

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The one thing that is not super useful is to get caught up in trying to figure out what's the 'right solution'. Because remember what I said up top, even for therapy, the best predictor of efficacy is the rapport between the therapist and the client, which means that a wide variety of techniques and methods can be helpful. It's just a matter of what resonates with you. I have learned a lot from therapist colleagues and books by therapists and trainings and so many therapists have learned a lot from me and other coaches.

We don't have to participate in the straw man fight between the two disciplines. We can take what's useful from different styles and methods and theories of the mind and individual therapists and coaches we encounter. And we can trust that whatever we're listening to that resonates, it resonates because it's useful for us and has something to offer us.

The one thing I think is essential and you won't be surprised to hear this since I'm a feminist coach. I do think it is absolutely essential, the one thing I would always tell you to screen for in any modality is that the coach or therapist you work with has a deep understanding of socialization and how it impacts women's minds.

If someone is trying to help you understand your thinking and change it and they do not understand the impact of socialization, they are absolutely missing one of the biggest elements at play. And that's not a moral failing on their part, they just haven't learned it yet. But that means they won't understand your thinking and they won't be able to help you change it.

Just imagine someone was trying to help you with childhood patterns and this person did not know that parents existed, never asked about them, never mentioned them. Just tried to do the whole thing without ever talking about your parents. It's hard to even imagine that because it's so bananas on the surface of it, but that's what it's like. Socialization is the same way.

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A person trying to help you understand why you think about yourself the way you do, who does not know about or even mention or analyze society and the specific messages women learn from society has no hope of getting to the root of the issue.

So that is the one piece of directive advice I will offer is, whether you're choosing a coach or a therapist or both. Someone, one of the people helping you with your brain needs to understand socialization and how it impacts women's minds otherwise it's just they're going to be hobbling without even knowing it. Just going to be missing a huge impact on your mental and emotional health and not even know that they're missing it. So, I always recommend that you screen and ask about that.

And if you are listening to this and you are a therapist and this isn't an integral part of your practice already. You are going to want to grab that free guide I have on how to use a feminist lens in your therapy practice. And how to help your women clients understand themselves better, change faster, get better results from your work together. Whether you identify as a feminist or not, whether your patients identify as a feminist or not, is not relevant. It is not about making protest signs together during sessions.

It is a guide to understanding socialization, its impact on women's minds, and how to start bringing that into your sessions in a way that will really empower your clients and help them see themselves more clearly. So, you can grab that at [feministtherapy.com](http://feministtherapy.com).

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.

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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.