

1: What Life Coaching IS and ISN'T



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *The Future Coach*. This podcast is all about what life coaching really is, how to do it well, and how to succeed as a coach whether you start a business, work as a coach in-house for a company, or are bringing coaching into your existing role or field.

I'm Kara Loewentheil, a Yale and Harvard Law grad, former reproductive rights attorney, turned master certified Life Coach, New York Times bestselling author, and host of *Unf*ck Your Brain*, which has 60 million downloads. I left a career in law to build a coaching business that has reached millions of women and generated over \$28 million in revenue.

And I created this new podcast because almost everything that most people believe about what coaching is and what coaches do is either incomplete or just wrong. And that misunderstanding is keeping people who would be extraordinary coaches from ever getting started.

So today we're going to fix that. This is episode one and we are starting at the beginning. What is life coaching? What does a coach actually do? And why does it matter? So let's get into it.

Welcome to *The Future Coach*, the podcast for independent coaches, in-house coaches, and the coach curious. I'm your host Kara Loewentheil, founder of The Socratic Coaching Academy. If you want to chart a new path, uplevel your skills, and build a successful career around coaching, you're in the right place. Let's go.

So when I tell people that I'm a life coach, there are three main misconceptions that I find that they may have. And I want to walk you through all three because if you are going to become a coach or be someone who brings coaching into an existing role, you need to understand how the people you want to help are thinking about what you do and what kind of misconceptions they may have.

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The person who's going to hire you or going to make the decision on allowing you to bring this work into your current role has almost certainly encountered at least one of these misconceptions. And if you cannot speak to them clearly and confidently about what life coaching actually is, you may lose people who need what you do before you get the chance to show them.

So the first misconception is that coaching is just cheerleading, that a coach is just there to give you a pat on the head and say, good job. And our idea of a cheerleader is, let's be real, not a serious person. And that's sexist, right? Because cheer is actually an incredibly hard and athletic sport and people who do cheer are actually very hardcore. But our popular conception of it, cheerleading is associated with just being super positive and yelling go, go, go, right? And that's not something that it sounds like would engage your mind or require high level skills if that was your job as a coach.

And if you think that's your job, you obviously wouldn't take your career as a coach very seriously. So we need to understand what real coaching actually is. Real coaching is not just telling someone they're amazing until they believe it. Real coaching is helping someone find the exact thoughts that are keeping them stuck and helping them change them. Those are completely different things.

And the truth is that most people come to coaching or they need coaching because they've experienced cheerleading from friends and family or colleagues, from lots of different places, and it never actually helped. That's why they need coaching. Real coaching works because it goes underneath the surface to find the thoughts that are actually driving the behavior.

And when you understand that is your job as a coach, that changes everything because you're not there just to make someone feel good or give them a pat on the head, you're there to help them think differently.

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The second misconception people have is that coaching is sort of like therapy lite, that coaching is like what you do if you can't afford a therapist or you just want something like softer and less rigorous or you don't know any different. But therapy and coaching are not doing the same thing at different price points. They are doing different things. There is certainly overlap in the Venn diagram in the sense that both of them are professions where you help people understand themselves better to improve their lives.

But therapy is primarily designed to help you understand where your patterns came from, to go back into your history and process the experiences that shaped how you think and feel today. And therapy is also what's appropriate for serious mental health challenges or mental illness that are not appropriate for coaching.

What coaching is designed to do is help you move forward. Coaching is asking what thought is running in your brain right now? What do you want to think instead? And how can we make sure that you build belief in that new thought?

And coaching can be a more direct intervention because coaches have a different set of tools and they have different professional obligations. Understanding a pattern and changing a pattern are two completely different cognitive processes, and coaching is what bridges that gap. It's the practice of actually building the new thought and making it stick.

I will do a whole episode going into detail on the differences at a later date once we've kind of covered more of the basics, but for now, suffice it to say, therapy and coaching are not competing with each other really. Many people do them sequentially or go back and forth or do them at the same time. I've had many clients come to me because their therapist recommended that they come to me, sent them my podcast, or told them to join my program. And I've had many clients who take the work we're doing, they bring it back to their therapist, they approach it from a different angle with them. These things can work together really beautifully.

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And then here's the third misconception that people have about coaching. And I'm going to spend a little time on this one because it's the most pernicious and also I think the most wrong. And that is the misconception that life coaching is like wellness grifting or an MLM or something. That anyone who calls themselves a life coach is just a charlatan or like a naive person who got taken in by one.

Now, your potential clients as a coach don't think this really, or at least not consciously, or they wouldn't be interested in coaching. But they've definitely heard the idea floating around, they could be concerned about whether there's some truth to it. And if you're someone who wants to bring coaching into an existing role and you are the one actually like pitching the idea of coaching and learning how to be a coach being valuable to your role, to your manager, your supervisor, they could have that misconception as well.

Now, there's absolutely some truth to the idea that some coaches aren't doing a great job. Some coaches are not well trained or don't have enough experience, sure. But this is not unique to coaching. This is true for every field, every human practice in the world, right? Has good practitioners and bad ones.

If you want to be a lawyer, you can go to Harvard Law School like I did, or you can get an online degree. You can hire an extraordinary therapist who changes your life or you can hire a mediocre therapist who just nods at you for 50 minutes and then says our time's up. You can work with a financial advisor who genuinely has your best interest at heart or you can hire one who's churning your portfolio for commissions.

Good doctors don't spend their time explaining why it's okay for doctors to exist even though there are bad doctors. And good lawyers aren't expected to preface every client meeting with a defense of the legal profession as a whole. And coaches shouldn't feel obligated to do that either.

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The existence of some bad coaching existing does not mean coaching is not real or that all coaches are bad or that coaches are responsible for their entire profession every time that they want to show up to serve. It just means there's some bad coaches, which is true of every single human endeavor that has ever existed.

There's a similar idea that because some coaches train other coaches, that means coaching isn't real somehow, right? It's like it's a pyramid scheme or it's an MLM or like the only thing coaches do is teach other coaches. So this is like categorically not true. I spent 10 years coaching women and I created \$25 million in revenue before I ever launched a certification program for new coaches. And so many coaches never teach or certify other coaches at all.

But again, every profession has some practitioners who just work with clients and then some practitioners who train new members of the profession. And then some practitioners who do both. That's literally how professions continue to exist. So, of course, I do think it's important when you are choosing a coach certification that you work with someone who's done something other than just certified coaches. Again, that's why I didn't even start a coach certification until a decade and \$25 million into my business because I wouldn't want to try to certify coaches before I had coached thousands of people, demonstrated my frameworks and my techniques, and proved that it's totally possible to have an incredible business without being in the business of certifying other coaches or doing business coaching or anything like that.

But the idea that the fact that some coaches train new coaches is like inherently problematic or means that's all coaching is, is just bananas. And it doesn't even make any sense. Like are we just supposed to have like one group of coaches who got certified in 1997 and then when they all die out, no coaches are ever made again?

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So it's also worth noting that I don't think the idea that coaching is somehow different than other professions is just because it's somewhat newer and more online than some other professions. I think it's also gendered. There's something very specific happening when life coaching, which is predominantly practiced by women and serves predominantly women, gets dismissed as not a real thing, even though good coaches every day are working directly with their clients using evidence-backed tools to help them change their lives, and women are making a living doing this work in a lot of different contexts.

And somehow there's like a atmosphere of skepticism about that. And meanwhile, Joe Rogan is hosting vaccine deniers on his podcast and has more influence on a presidential election than almost any media institution in the country, and he's taken very seriously as an influential person. I don't think that's a coincidence. There is a sexism to the way that some people talk about coaching and the coaching industry. And I don't think it's a coincidence that it's an industry that allows women to make money helping other people doing something they're interested in and they love often working remotely.

Now, again, not all coaches are entrepreneurs by any means. Some people are W2 employees in other people's businesses. Like I have several full-time coaches in my business. A lot of people are bringing coaching into their work in a corporation, managing people differently in HR, being an internal coach. So you absolutely don't have to be an entrepreneur to be a coach, but I do just think it's interesting how society is always very negative about any sort of field that is largely populated by women that allows women to make money and be independent.

In any case, if you're listening to this podcast, it's because you want to be a good coach and that's what matters. You're not responsible for the value of an entire profession. You're just responsible for showing up and offering the value that you have to offer to the people who want to hear about it.

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So we've talked about the misconceptions about coaching. After the break, I want to get into what coaching actually is and I want to give you some specific examples of what it looks like in practice versus what it gets confused with. So stick around, we'll be right back.

Welcome back. So let me give you the definition of coaching that I have used for over a decade. Coaching is the practice of helping someone examine the thoughts and feelings that are driving their current results and helping them develop the capacity to think differently so they can create different outcomes in their lives. That's it. And if I were going to do an even simpler definition, it would just be that a coach is a mirror that reflects back what someone is thinking, feeling, and doing to help them see it differently so they can change.

We don't act based on our circumstances. We act based on what we think about our circumstances. Two people can be in the exact same situation and do completely different things because they're thinking completely different thoughts about it. So if you want to change what someone does, if they want to change what they do really, they have to change what they think. It doesn't start with the schedule or the strategy or the five-year plan. It may end up with those, but that's not where it starts.

And once you really understand this, you realize that almost every problem a person has, there's a thought problem underneath. Some problems, they can actually change by changing their thoughts. Some things in life we can't change, but we can change our own reactions to them. That's where our power is. Either way, there's a thought underneath we have to get to. And that means your job as a coach is to help them get to that thought. So coaching is not telling someone what to do, it is not giving advice, it is not handing someone a script or a plan or a framework and saying, just do this.

So here's an example of the difference in practice, right? Someone comes to a coach and says, I have a really hard conversation coming up with my boss and I don't know what to say. Now, if you were not a coach, if you

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were just their parent, you might cheerlead and say like, you're awesome, you got this. They have to recognize how great you are. Or a friend might be validating and say like, oh my god, like of course you're scared, that's so scary. I'm scared to talk to my boss too. It's okay if you're not ready. Neither of those things which are totally well-intentioned, help them feel differently.

A non-effective coach or like ChatGPT would just give them a script and tell them what to do. Here's how to open it, here's how to make your case, here's how to close the conversation. And the person would not follow the script and still not do it because they're still scared.

A good coach doesn't tell anything, they ask. How are you feeling when you think about this conversation? Why do you feel that way? How do you want to feel? What would you need to believe in order to feel differently? It does not matter what script you have if you walk in believing you don't deserve what you're asking for, you're not going to really walk through that door at all.

Let's look at another example. Let's say someone has a partner who's cheated on them. And they go to their parents and their friends and their church buddies or whoever and all those people who are not coaches tell them different things based on their own beliefs. Some of them say, you have to forgive, you can work it out, couples get through this, that's not a reason to leave. And then some people say, oh my god, you should get divorced immediately. That's so disrespectful, that's so terrible. And the person isn't any clearer at the end of that. All they know is everybody thinks different things about what they should do and they don't have any idea what to do.

A good coach helps that person get clear on their own values, their own goals. What do you actually want from a partnership? What do you believe you deserve? What's your story about this having happened? What kind of relationship do you want to have? What future do you want for yourself? We don't have a predetermined agenda in mind. We ask questions to help

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them explore. The person who gets told what to do just goes home and continues to be confused. The person who's getting coached so that they actually have clarity for themselves can act from their own conviction and that's what actually produces forward movement.

So in both of these examples, you can see that the change is not built on positivity or inspiration or just telling someone to believe in themselves, and it's not built on just like giving them a minute-by-minute game plan. It is built on something at a deeper level. Good coaching starts with cognitive psychology, which is the science of how thoughts create feelings and feelings drive behavior. Cognitive psychology is why coaching works at the level that it does.

People are not stuck generally because they lack information or they lack motivation or they need a better plan. They're stuck because they have a specific thought that's producing a specific feeling that's making a specific action either happen or not happen. And you saw that in both of the examples I just gave you, right? The woman going into the hard conversation with her boss is not stuck because she doesn't know what to say. She's stuck because of what she believes about the experience or the potential of walking into that room.

The person who's been cheated on isn't stuck because they don't have enough information about whether to stay or go or they don't know the right answer. They're stuck because of what they believe about themselves, their partner, and what happened and their potential for the future. That is how cognitive psychology can show up in a coaching session.

And it's not just cognitive psychology, it also has to be approached with understanding of somatics and the body and how the mind and body relate and with what I call intersectional coaching. Because your clients' thoughts don't appear out of nowhere. They come from specific messages that people receive about who they are, what they're allowed to want, what the options are for them, what's possible for them, who they're supposed to be,

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what they're allowed to think and feel, and those are layered through every identity they have.

And that matters enormously for your work as a coach because if you help someone change a thought without understanding where that thought came from, you are treating the symptom while the system that keeps generating it runs totally unchecked underneath.

Think about a woman who comes to coaching because she really wants to show up more as a leader. She's getting that feedback and her reviews that they need to see her take more ownership, they need her to be more proactive, they need to see her demonstrate leadership. But she's scared to speak up in important meetings or voice her opinion. And that's because her thought is, I don't have anything valuable to say. I might say something stupid. Everyone's going to judge me.

Those aren't coming just from her individual psychology. They're coming from how women are socialized to undervalue themselves, underestimate their own intelligence and contributions. They come from a school system that teaches women to always be sure to get the right answer and not to take risks, from a workplace culture that talks over women and where men get credit for their ideas, right? It comes from decades of messaging about whose voice counts and whose doesn't. And when you can see that entire intersectional perspective, you see that the way she's responding to what she believes is very rational. But we have to help her change what she believes if we want to get a different outcome for her.

So we need both cognitive psychology, we need intersectionality, and then we need that somatic awareness I mentioned, because your thoughts create your emotions and they impact your nervous system states, which is why in order to change the thoughts, you have to be aware of how they impact your body and how you experience your emotions in your body. That woman who's scared to have the hard conversation with her boss, she can totally intellectually agree with her parents that she's worked so hard

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and they should recognize her. But if she just intellectually agrees with that, but doesn't really believe it, she's still not going to go into that room and have that conversation. If she only intellectually agrees with it, it won't change her feelings, it won't change her behavior.

A good coach connects cognitive psychology with that intersectional lens to the somatics and the body to help actually shift what a person is thinking, feeling, and doing. So your job as a coach is not to tell someone what to think even, right? It is to help them create awareness of how they're thinking and then help facilitate them creating a new, true belief that they actually feel in their body that produces new actions and new outcomes.

Now, that's obviously a lot for someone to do, and we're going to be talking more about every element of that throughout this podcast. But I wanted this first episode to really give you an overview of what coaching is and what it is not. Coaching is not cheerleading, it is not therapy lite, it is not wellness grifting. It is a rigorous and powerful practice for helping human beings change the specific thoughts that are producing the specific outcomes that they don't want in their lives.

And it works because it's built on real science and real philosophy and a real understanding of the world your clients are actually living in. The woman who was not able to have that conversation with her boss, the person who isn't sure what to do about the cheating partner, they are both running scripts in their brains that make complete sense given everything they've been taught about themselves and everything that they have believed until now. But a coach's job is to help them believe something new so that they can get a different outcome and move forward. That's what good coaching does. That's what Socratic coaching, the way that I teach it, does. And we are going to talk more about all of this in the next episodes.

Thank you for being here for the very first episode of *The Future Coach*. Next episode, we're going to talk about who actually makes a good coach. So if you've been thinking about getting into coaching, whether it's as an

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entrepreneur or working for someone else as a coach or you want to bring coaching into your current role or you are a coach and you just want to silence that voice that always wonders if you're good enough at what you're doing, you're going to want to tune into the next episode. I'll see you there.