

10: When Is It Too Late to Start As A Coach?



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With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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A couple of weeks ago, while I was running our Coach Curious Prep School, I ended up face-to-face on Zoom with a woman I'll call Tracy. She was 63 years old. She spent 42 of those years as a registered nurse. And as she came on, she announced that she was still in her pajamas and hadn't brushed her hair because it was early where she was, but she just had a burning question she needed to ask, which I love.

So the question she asked, I think, felt really personal and individual to her in her mind, and it was, but it's also a question I've been asked by women every age from 30 to 70. And that is, am I too old to become a coach? Is it too late? If you've wondered the same, whatever age you are, you're going to want to listen to this episode. 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 in the last episode, we talked about the fear of starting over. And this week, I want to add the next layer, which is the thought that people often have about being too old to start a new coaching practice or career. Now, I'm a life coach, so you might expect I'm going to say that there's no such thing as too old for any career. And it's true, as a coach, I tend to err on the side of possibility.

First, because I think women are so socialized to immediately reject their own hopes, dreams, and goals, especially if those look any different from the socially sanctioned path or whatever the early authority figures in their lives told them they were supposed to do. You can bet that my two Ivy League law school graduate parents did not originally think that life coaching was a real career, and so for a long time, neither did I.

Secondly, human brains are wired to fear uncertainty and change. We look to the crowd for the reassurance of conformity. Our brains don't want us to

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take risks, stand out, or be different because all of those things used to be risks to our survival. Evolutionarily, they were risks to everyone, but for women in patriarchy, they were especially risky. If you were too weird or too noticeable or too different, you were probably going to end up destitute or possibly burned as a witch.

Third, in our society, women still suffer social penalty for being different. But we're also in an era of intense ageism, especially around women. American society, in particular, is always on the hunt for the next young thing, and women are taught their value lies in being young and sexually appealing, which society tells you is the same thing, even though it's not.

With the dramatic increase in Botox and plastic surgery and anti-aging fixations, we're seeing this complete rejection of the reality of aging, which is reinforcing these norms. And I don't think it's an accident that women are socialized to see being young as the ideal because what are young women in addition to young? Often more impressionable, more willing to go along to get along, they've built less professional power, they've built less economic power. Not because they're women, just because they're young.

The prefrontal cortex doesn't finish developing until 27, regardless of your sex or gender. Women suffer the effects of ageism much more in the workforce than men do, which is actually all the more reason to pursue a career where you can be in control of it, but that's getting ahead of ourselves here. The bottom line is that if you're in the habit of calling your dreams unrealistic, of looking for all the reasons things won't work, it's no wonder that you look at becoming a coach and you think you're too old.

And this is a conversation I've had with women in their 30s and 40s for sure, but it comes up more often with women in their 50s and 60s. As a coach, I'm always going to be in your corner to go after what you want. But I live in reality too. Like, you want to start training to be a ballet dancer at 50? I'm absolutely going to cheer you on and coach your brain. But do I think your starting age is going to be an asset when you try to get hired by the American Ballet Company? Probably not.

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It's going to be one of those "in spite of" inspirational stories if it happens. You want to go back to medical school after your first career? It absolutely can and has been done. But it's hard to argue that residency and those 24-hour sleepless shifts aren't going to be harder on a 45-year-old body compared to a 25-year-old one. It doesn't mean it can't be done. It just means you have to be ready for what it will take. But when it comes to coaching, I actually think this fear is just totally misplaced. And I'm going to tell you why right after this quick break.

So what makes coaching different from careers that are harder to start when you're older? You'll notice that the two examples I gave, ballet dancer, doctor, both depend on physical youth in terms of stamina. That's the one place that I think it's objectively more challenging to do certain things when you're old compared to when you're young.

Although, obviously, that also is not a hard and fast rule, right? As a hypermobile chronic pain girly myself, I assure you there are women 20 years older than me with more physical fitness and endurance out there. The beautiful thing about coaching, though, is that it doesn't require any special physical endurance, which means there is no age limit. And more than that, I actually think age can be an asset as a coach. One of the beautiful things about coaching is that we're not bound by the rules around therapist self-disclosure.

We're allowed to talk about our own lives and our own journeys in order to help our clients understand their lives and help them see the possibilities out there for them. Which means that all of our life experiences inform the wisdom and perspective we have to offer. The more we've seen and experienced, the more we have to draw from.

Now, if you're younger and listening to this, I am not saying a 25-year-old can't be a good coach. I was a pretty perceptive, compassionate, and non-judgmental 25-year-old, and you might have been too, or you may be one right now. But that actually gets at what I think is so special about being a

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coach. The beauty of being a coach is that your clients find you and come to you and want to pay you because they relate to you.

At this point in my coaching career, sure, I have clients from many walks of life because I've been doing this for 10 years. When I was starting out, I was coaching people a lot like the version of me that was then, which is women lawyers in their 30s, right? They related to me because I could speak their language. I had a similar education. I understood what they were going through. Even though I hadn't been a corporate lawyer and many of my clients were, we had enough in common.

So what this means is that if you're a 60-year-old empty-nester who created a whole new life after your kids left home and now you want to be a coach, but you're telling yourself that no one will hire you, you're misunderstanding why people hire coaches. Other 60-year-old empty-nesters who want a reinvention don't want to hire a 25-year-old to help them with that. What does a 25-year-old know about that? A 25-year-old can absolutely practice the core coaching skills and help them in reality.

Maybe they'll hire the 25-year-old if they don't see any other options. But given the choice between the 25-year-old and you who are their age, have gone through the same experience, and have done what they want to do, they will hire you in a heartbeat. And you know who wants to hire the 25-year-old? It's other 25-year-olds who want help with what that 25-year-old has figured out about being 25.

Obviously, I'm not saying people only hire people exactly their age. This isn't like a birth date matching system. But I'm just saying that as a coach, part of what you offer people is your experience, your hard-earned wisdom, your variety of life perspectives, and what you've gone through. And your people are the ones who are going to want to learn it from you because you are like them.

Now, one note for those of you who use social media and what you want to object here is that you see a ton of coaches on social media, and they

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mostly aren't your age, and there are so many already. When you're interested in being a coach, if you're someone who uses social media, you are now getting a worldview filtered through an algorithm that isn't representative. So social media users on Instagram and TikTok tend to be younger, and social media shapes the algorithm to what you're interested in.

So if you're into coaching and self-development, that's all you see and it seems like the whole world is doing it. And so your brain decides that the whole world is full of coaches and they're all younger than you. But that's just not reality. That's just one slice of the coaching world. If you're over 45 or so, most people your age have actually never been marketed to by a coach. They may not have ever heard of a coach or known anyone who worked with one.

So that means there's a massive population of people going through exactly the transitions that you understand best: retirement, divorce, being an empty-nester, late career reinvention, health changes as you get older, and none of them are currently being served. So, you're not behind, you're actually early. And your job is to look for what your age and experience gives you that will set you apart.

So, here's your homework. I want you to write down one group of people going through or wanting to create a change that you understand firsthand because you've already lived it yourself. And then I want you to write down three reasons you are better qualified to coach that person than someone else younger than you.

Now, before I let you go, there is one more brain drama element we need to talk about because the other fear that people have about age and becoming a coach is less about whether people will want to hire them and more about their ability to learn how to do something new at their age. So there are a few things I want to remind you to remember when your brain's telling you that.

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First, the brain is neuroplastic, and that doesn't disappear just because you're older. You are perfectly capable of learning new things. Did you learn how to play a new card game with your grandson the other day? You learned something new. Did you get to know someone new and learn about their life recently? You learned something new. Did you go to a training on a new system or tool or protocol at your job? Did you attend a talk at your church or synagogue recently? You are learning all the time.

And if you aren't, if you truly have somehow not learned anything new in the last few years, that is only because you haven't tried, and your brain is probably starving for the chance and the stimulation. Secondly, there is plenty of evidence out there in the world about people who succeeded at things they started late in life. Vera Wang didn't start designing clothes until she was 40. Julia Child didn't learn to cook until her 40s and published her first cookbook at 49.

Laura Ingalls Wilder published *Little House on the Prairie* at 65. Grandma Moses, the famous folk painter, started painting at 78 after being a housewife and a farm laborer. You can find a lot of other examples. So if you have this particular brain drama, your second piece of homework is to Google for more, more examples, and to think about everyone you know in your life and look for other examples of people starting new ventures, making big changes, and improving their lives in their later years.

Getting remarried late in life is learning a whole new thing. There is evidence in your life around you. If you want to be a coach, you have to start with coaching yourself on these thoughts. So let's get to it.