

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

Welcome to *Unf*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard Law School grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello my chickens. So, this is one of the only times I've ever had to have a second round for a podcast. Because Mollie and I tried to do this podcast originally. And we just, we had a great conversation but we just very quickly devolved – not devolved, but evolved maybe into us being like, I felt like everything's made up and nothing is real. And what are thoughts even? And what is a brain? And I was like, "We've got to pull this back, this is not going to be that helpful for people." So, we are reconvening today for our conversation.

But we are going to talk about something that I'm so excited to have Mollie on and she's going to tell you a little bit about her background. She was a therapist and is now a coach. And I think that there's so much conversation, therapy versus coaching. And we're going to talk about all of that today but we're also going to invite you to stop thinking about it, like it's a dual where they meet in Weehawken at 5:00am. One doesn't have to win. It's not adversarial, therapy and coaching are two helpful modalities and we are going to talk about when one is more appropriate than the other.

But I just want to invite you to, if in your mind there's a little v symbol in between them and it's therapy versus coaching, it can be that, it could be an and symbol. It's not, one of them doesn't have to be the answer to everything. So, we're going to talk through all that today, what is coaching versus what is therapy, what's appropriate for what, differences, similarities, all that. So, with that hilarious introduction, Mollie tell us about yourself.

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

Mollie: Thank you so much. I appreciate that. It's quite a rabbit hole of a topic, isn't it? So, we did go down it pretty quickly last time. The term that I use to describe the work I do is made up entirely because of this issue. So, my background as you said is as a therapist and I pivoted to coaching because it suits my more irreverent and disruptive style. The term that I use for it is clinical life coaching, that it's life coaching with any eye towards mental health. So, there is some foundation and framework that is clinical.

But a lot of what I'm bringing to the table is different and it's a different flavor of the conversation, but it really does draw upon elements of both. There is this hybrid piece which speaks to how polarizing an issue this can be. Because there are people who think that that hybrid is inappropriate or think that some people are only appropriate for this particular treatment, and the fact of the point you're bringing up. So, I'm glad we're getting into it.

Kara: Yeah. So, let's talk about this. Why don't you tell us what you see as some of the differences between therapy and coaching. But we're going to start with one subset of that. We're going to get in a minute to which things are appropriate for which kind of 'treatment' or experience. But there's also differences in just conceptually how people think, how do therapists think about what they're doing and what's the right kind of way of doing it and versus coaching. So, what's your perspective on that?

Mollie: Sure. Well, my take on that is that as a therapist I was drawing upon a particular body of academic knowledge. And all therapists are drawing on is a similar body of economic knowledge that they might have specific training in particular areas or specialties. And as a coach I'm not just drawing on that body of academic knowledge, also drawing on my own experience. And the reason that's important is that what you are drawing upon as a clinician is going to inform what your relationship looks like with your client.

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

So, there are particular expectations of what the clinical relationship looks like with the therapist and client, and what those boundaries look like, what topics you're introducing, what topics you are absolutely not introducing. The kinds of questions you're asking, are they more open ended? Are they more leading? So, there's a really different approach to the conversation and that's involved with the conversation itself as a therapist than as a coach.

And you can certainly make the argument by comparison, is the coach just kind of cowboying along with whatever conversation they want to run? And this is where I like to draw on the clinical foundation to say, no, in fact we are not just cowboying along especially those of us that...

Kara: What does cowboying along even mean? I see someone on a horse with a lasso, how do I know if I'm cowboying, what's happening?

Mollie: Right. It's a verb now.

Kara: Well, I have a new word, everybody, get ready, cowboying is now a verb.

Mollie: When I decided to give up licensure and pivot to coaching much of the feedback I got from my colleagues is, "Are people going to take you seriously and will you have the same credibility?" So, when I am speaking to us coaches cowboying along here, this is more about the perception of how we're operating and less about how we're actually functioning in the conversation. And it's tricky because it's an unlicensed field. So, there are plenty of people who do not have training, experience or even the tiniest shred of credibility.

They are going out and introducing themselves to people as though they're capable of a conversation that they maybe don't have enough training for.

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

That doesn't mean that they don't have something to offer the conversation necessarily. But I think it's wise to have some sort of structure or some sort of framework for how you're approaching this. So, the cowboying is really just that it's a different framework, it's different scaffolding than the therapeutic conversation. It still exists but different bones.

Kara: Yeah. I mean one way of thinking about this might be it feels to me – and again obviously all this depends because we have to have at least one caveat here without going in another rabbit hole, which is we talk about therapy like it's one thing. But obviously what Freud and Jung were doing is pretty different than today's modern CBT practitioner or today's psychiatrist who's treating multi – what is it called? Dual diagnosis, addiction and personality disorders. This is a big range of things.

And I live in New York which may be the last place that there are still Freudian analysts, I don't know.

Mollie: I think it is, it always has been.

Kara: This is a huge range. So, it's sort of like saying doctors. Well, there's a million different kinds. And maybe it's even more diverse than that because probably most medical doctors agree on some biological basis of how they think the body works. Whereas therapists can have very different ideas of how the mind works, and the same for coaches. Everything from technically the head of the Notre Dame football team and me are both coaches. But these are very different kinds of coaches.

But as a whole in general either because of whether it's licensure or how the field developed or whatever, that there's more formality in a therapeutic relationship in terms of therapist and client for instance, therapists can't have or aren't supposed to have social relationships with their clients. If you see your client out in public you're not supposed to acknowledge you know

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

them unless the client does that first. Whereas in coaching it's much more common to have some kind of social relationship with your coachees.

Or I've hired people that have been my students to then coach me when they had certain expertise. And I'm working with two of my former current students as their client right now because in their area of expertise they have something to teach me. So, I think to me I feel coaching is a combination, it's the role of coach depending on the person can be almost anything from a peer educator kind of or a peer supporter, that's sort of my qualification is I have also worked on this.

And my life has gotten better in this way and let me teach you what I have learned literally just from my own personal experience all the way up to almost the lineage of a spiritual teacher in some way. I live with these people and this is my tradition. And anywhere in between, so it's just a more kind of open field. And as you said it's not licensed. I too agree if you want to be a coach and you can, you should go get certified. I think it's useful to learn a scaffolding, a framework, a set of tools to have that kind of behind you.

But also, part of this is that therapy and coaching are in very different stages of development as a field because when therapy was where coaching is now there wasn't licensure. There wasn't a whole worked out board of ethics. There wasn't a therapy board. There weren't exams. As any new field matures it becomes institutionalized. And then sort of these sets of rules basically come up and are developed and curriculums are developed. And you begin to have a more kind of rigorous gatekeeping for good and bad outcomes of who's in a field.

So coaching, if we're going with that wild west cowboy framework, coaching is still a very young industry, a young field of study both of those

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

things just like therapy was a 100 years ago. And so, it is much more unregulated and there's so much more diversity there.

Mollie: Yeah. When I think of the coaching the way that you're describing it, it really falls more in the category of education. The relationship is not so sacred but the information that's being transmitted is really what's more sacred. Whereas in the therapeutic relationship there's such boundaries around the relationship because it is so sacred because you're really doing a deep expedition of things. It's less about let me develop an understanding and a working knowledge of this information which is much more the coaching conversation.

Kara: Yeah. I think there's also differences again, I'll stop saying this, there's a caveat that anything I say is a huge generalization in this episode. But I think because therapy has this sort of – I mean there's a range. So obviously psychiatry, very medical people and medical doctors. But then there's the sort of quasi medicalization or medicalized model I think, for some people where sort of therapy is a treatment performed by their practitioner on the person who comes and there is a clear set of this is what would be healthy. And this is unhealthy.

And this is dysregulated and this is regulated. And this is dysfunctional and this is functional and we're going to move you along. Whereas I find in coaching at least the way I was taught to coach, so again, I can't speak for anybody who coaches from some other philosophical foundation. But the kind of coaching that I do really has a lot less of that. And I think this will lead us in a minute to where is it appropriate and where is it not appropriate? But when we're talking about human beings are fully functional basically working, are okay out in the world or less.

There is less of that sort of preconception I think or judgment of that. And I remember going to this when I first started studying coaching and I had just

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

gotten certified. And I went with my friend, Rachel Hart, who's a coach to this live CBT demonstration kind of. It was interesting, held by a psychology school. And the person who volunteered to be the client, or I guess it was a client. Was getting coached and he was having this conflict between should he stay and marry his girlfriend or should he go study in a monastery and become a monk basically, a Buddhist monk.

And again, this was just one therapist, so this could have just been this guy. But it was just so clear that the therapist thought that he knew the answer to this. It was sort of this monk thing is immature. What would be maturity, would be staying integrated in life's society in this traditional normative way and marry the girlfriend.

Mollie: Right. He had an agenda.

Kara: Yeah, he had an agenda. But it was like the sort of what's healthy and unhealthy. And I just remember being like, I don't know dude, maybe that guy should be a monk. What do you know?

Mollie: Right. Which is interesting because you think of the therapeutic role and even under the umbrella of CBT as one, who really has to be more reserved. And the coaches are the ones who are saying, "Hey, I have a strategy, you should [crosstalk]."

Kara: Yeah. I had the opposite experience. My experience of that therapist were much more – the just ones I have had have been much more kind of directive and it has felt much more like there was an agenda.

Mollie: Interesting. To me that's a sign, to me, again, take it all with a grain of salt. But to me that's a sign of an unhealthy therapist. Or just a therapist who needs to call themselves a coach and stop pretending they're doing therapy.

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

Kara: Right. Because I think of coaching as having I have zero agenda. I don't know, maybe you should be a monk. Let's just make sure you like your reasons and how do they feel? It's less of that sort of model. But for sure I think we agree that there are places where coaching is definitely not the only thing you need. It's not appropriate for coaching to be the only treatment. So, let's kind of talk about that. I think this is a spectrum but how do you think about it?

Mollie: Well, this is going to be, again, a broad generalization I'm going to bring up here just repeatedly. But there's a sort of spectrum of moving from going into our somebody training so to speak as the late gnostic intermediary Ram Dass described it. When we grow up we go into somebody training. And there is an element to therapy that I see as kind of the final piece of that somebody training. That's not to say that it's not useful later along the line. But when we're learning who we are. What do I like? What's okay? Where do my boundaries go?

That there's something about the therapeutic conversation that's really helpful for putting that all into perspective of how did I evolve? Where are my lines? Where do I end? Where do you begin? What do I like? I do like, I don't like. Okay, I can say that? Okay, alright, I'm going to practice saying it. You're cultivating the sense of self, the selfness. And when I encounter a client who is sort of in the middle of that transition because what happens after we have established that self, if you keep doing the work then you have to move into nobody training.

Then we start dismantling the self, the way we have to have things be in order to be okay or I have to look like this or have these qualities in order to be comfortable with myself. We start working on how to let those qualities fall away. Now, this is not to say that that's a coaching conversation and establishing those qualities for therapy conversations because I don't think

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

it's that black and white. But I do think there is an argument to be made that there is a transition that happens.

And often someone in the middle of that transition is going, "Wait, am I allowed to establish boundaries?" Which is a somebody conversation. Or someone who is like, "I'm really stuck in my boundaries. And I have to hold my boundaries in order to be okay." And teaching them, they can actually let some of those go and practice still identifying as who they are with their own consciousness without needing those boundaries, or having to be seen as sexy, funny, intelligent, achieved, whatever it is. That I find is really useful for the coaching conversation. So, I realized I just opened a can of worms here.

Kara: No, I think that's super interesting, yeah. I like that that's just a totally different perspective from the way I think about it. So, the listeners can hear that's sort of like where you are in your life stage journey kind of conversation framework. And then for me I think the other spectrum I think of it along is sort of – I don't have quite a name for this because severity is not quite the right word.

Mollie: Well, maybe degree of pathology or what we come to understand [crosstalk].

Kara: Right. I think that thought work is always helpful for everybody in the sense that if you are conscious you are having thoughts about yourself or whatever is going on with you. And thought work is helpful for that. But it's not the only tool that you ever need. Just like I would be like, "Your foot is broken, I guess you should do some thought work to just feel better about that." I would be like, "Go to an orthopedist please." And yes, do some thought work about that experience if you need to.

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

And so, there are a lot of different fields that could be necessary, including psychiatric care, medication, non-medical. I mean psychiatric care that's not medication, whatever that is. There's different procedures. There's different techniques. Or intense psychological support if you are struggling with something that is very debilitating. I think the old version that they used to say for coaching was therapy is if you're dysfunctional or going to functional. And then coaching is for people who are functional but want to be amazing.

I mean it sort of gets at something and just being, well, if you are in active psychosis, thought work is not the only thing that you need in that moment.

Mollie: Right, because our thoughts are not necessarily credible.

Kara: Yeah. And you can't really, you're not in a place where you can do that. And certainly, people can be in various different psychological states where they can't really even access those techniques, and may need additional support. So, I think that gets at something but to me it's not – it is more of a spectrum as opposed to being if you're dysfunctional it's this. If you're functional it's that. And meanwhile I have lots of clients who went through therapy and found it helpful, or didn't, or whatever, the whole spectrum.

But basically, got to a point where their therapist was like, "Okay, I mean I think we've resolved what you came to work on. And the way you feel now is just kind of how normal, this is just human life." That's that kind of. And they were like, "That can't be that. I don't know exactly what I need but there is something else. I need help to not just heal but evolve into this next vision of myself I don't have yet.

Mollie: Right. And that's where I think we get this idea of okay, therapy is for healing.

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

Kara: Yeah. That's sort of a way of saying somebody, nobody, yeah. Or like somebody and a different somebody, who are you going to become next. You might be fully functional and fine, not displaying any serious pathology, not totally working in your life. And even feeling good and still be like, "Yeah, but secretly I want to start a deep sea observatory and I don't feel that I can because I don't feel capable." Whatever. And I want to become this next person and how do I do that?

But I think for me I just – this is the place where I most want to break down the therapy or coaching. Because I'm just like both, motherfucker, why does it have to be one or the other?

Mollie: Amen to both, motherfucker, yeah.

Kara: All of it. Just why are we, you know, obviously yes, some people have financial constraints or other constraints. But to me it's a spectrum, there's places where you absolutely need professional, psychiatric, and psychological care, coaching. If you can only do one, you do that one. Coaching is not going to solve those problems. But if you can do both, coaching is still helpful. I mean I have worked with people who had a diagnosis of – who also had all of the medical care they needed.

And so, the big disclaimer, they had their psychiatric care in place, all of that and their therapeutic care. And also, they had intrusive voices or a diagnosis of schizophrenia or whatever because as long as you're conscious you're having thoughts about that. How do you think about your diagnosis? How do you think about your symptoms? What story do you tell yourself about what's possible for you? That shit's all coaching, how you talk to yourself about your condition or your experience.

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

And we've had people in The Clutch who again have their psychiatric care in place and have also used thought work to help them relate to the thoughts that they have that occasion the need for that care.

Mollie: Well, you just said one of the keywords for me which coaching is about, which is that it's really about the relationship. We look at the therapeutic storyline from the psychodynamic perspective. It's here is how you got the way you got. Here's the cause and here's the effect. It's very Newtonian in that sense. The apple falls because of gravity.

But coaching for me feels like playfully Einsteinian, it's all relative. It's all about the relationship to yourself and the thought, or yourself and the anger, or yourself and the concept, yourself and the fear. And breaking down that relationship, that's a nuanced conversation. And that's why I think it's more about the relationship with the person. Is this the right person? It's not is this the appropriate therapist or the appropriate coach. But are you in the right dynamic with the right teacher, essentially.

Kara: Yeah, and that they can go together. You have trauma, you may need trauma specific therapy. And you just also probably have thoughts about the whole fact that you have trauma, about the symptoms you have. You have a story about what that means for you and your life, and your relationship to it. All of that is what thought work and coaching is about to me. So just if we could abolish one thing it would be the either or, just all of it. Do all of it. The podcast is free. Go to therapy and listen to the podcast.

And of course, people do, I get messages of people being like, "My therapist told me about your podcast and now we listen and talk about it together." But I think it's that spectrum. So, there's obviously places that coaching is inappropriate as a sole thing. But also, I mean to me it's hard to imagine a good therapeutic relationship where somebody would be like, "No, you should not listen to a podcast about being nicer to yourself and

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

thinking about your thoughts, that's a bad thing. That contradicts our therapy or something."

Mollie: That's a threatened therapist.

Kara: Right, that's more about the therapist. Also, we shouldn't read Socrates apparently.

Mollie: Right. And that's just something to be aware of. If your coach is telling you, "Don't go to therapy", or your therapist is telling you, "Don't go to coaching." You have the right to be playfully suspicious.

Kara: Yeah, absolutely. To me it's just the more tools the better. And I think that people get so intense about this because they think that it's – and I actually find that sort of some of my students who are therapists who also became coaches have the most conflict around this and are kind of the most distraught over this in a way that I just – it hurts my heart. But I'm just also this just isn't necessary. We can be in favor of both or all of it.

Mollie: Well, I think it's not unlike falling into a spiritual path that suits you but there's a degree of anxiety about, well, can I hold onto it. And then you feel the need to be evangelical and proselytize about it and galvanize your own faith by recruiting others. And that's what it can look like. Don't go down the coaching path. Aren't we going to stay together as therapists? Aren't we going to keep the party line?

Kara: Yeah, it's in group, out group thing.

Mollie: Right. And I don't mean that therapists are exclusively responsible for that. It's all over the place.

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

Kara: Yeah. I think that's partly, comes from people want there to be one answer. Just the thing. It's therapy. It's coaching. It's the model Brooke Castillo created at The Life Coach School. It's shadow work. It's liberating. As opposed to you need to try different things and see what works for you. Again, even just therapy is not one thing. You go to one therapist who's extremely different from another therapist and the same with coaching. So, there's this desire. And this for me, all the work I do is about how are we socialized.

People socialized as women and people with marginalized identities. We are all socialized to believe that we can't possibly know the answer or be trusted to know what's good for ourselves. Somebody else knows it's probably an old white dude, he probably has a fancy job title, or he has a PhD, or whatever. There's just so much socialization that teaches us to – and especially for women I think when it comes to feelings and anything in the body.

There is so much socialization that alienates us from our own selves and teaches us that we're emotional, and hysterical, and unreliable, whatever, all this stuff. And that's what we want there, be an answer. Okay, it is therapy, or it is coaching, or it's this, or it's that, or it's whatever. It's this false illusion of safety. But the truth is you've got to figure out what works for you. If you go to five different therapists, go to five different coaches. Listen to all the podcasts, read what they have to say. Ask them questions. See what works for you.

Of course, we all get resistance during what is a successful coaching and therapeutic process, I don't mean the minute you have a negative emotion you should quit. But it may be a combination of things, it may be different things at different times in your life. It may be different things, I went through this, I've talked about this on the podcast so far as I've come out of it. But a really challenging six to eight months where I was doing some of

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

the deepest emotion and thought work I'd really ever had to do on something. And I was, fucking, all of it.

My partner and I were in couples therapy. I had a relationship coach. I did tapping EFT which I didn't believe in before I did it. I worked with a nervous system coach. Obviously I had the resources to hire all these people one-on-one but most of these people had free podcasts. I was just using a variety of techniques. And I was willing to be, hi, tapping makes no sense to me and I think this is stupid but let's try it. We'll see what happens. And then it fucking blew my mind.

Mollie: Right. But the uncertainty, that's incredible, the uncertainty that is part of the process as opposed to, there's something about the old white guy who's like, "You're fucked up? Cool. I have an answer." And then we have that dynamic that them seeking the answer only affirms how fucked up you are in the first place. As opposed to what you're describing which is being in the uncertainty, being in the not knowing, being in the excavation process and the seeking and going, "Well, I like this and this kind of works. Well, this is fucked up, I don't buy this.

Kara: And all of the help, it wasn't like I tried five things and I got to the fifth and that was the one that solved it. It was like, I got some from here, and some from here, and this person said that thing. And then I connected it to that thing that came up over there. You have to take authority and ownership of your own healing and self-development journey.

Mollie: The fact that there is no answer demands then that you be in relationship with your own healing process. Thank God there's no answer or we would just be able to fix ourselves and move on to the next fucking burrito that we get to eat or whatever it is. But you actually have to be in a process, to be in relationship with the process. And again, here I am with

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

this coaching and the relationship thing. But you get to bypass a process if there's just an answer and you didn't have the luxury of doing that.

Kara: Yeah. And I think that gets to one of the things I particularly like about coaching. And of course, I think there are therapists working on this. I follow some of them on Facebook. There's obviously a lot of diversity there too in terms of thought. But one of the things I like about coaching is that I think it decentralizes authority and I refuse to take on that authority in a way that is my clients have to figure it out for themselves.

I'm obviously their coach and help them but I'm like, "I don't know what the fuck you should do. I don't know if you should think that. How does it feel? What do you want to do, what do you?" I have no idea.

Mollie: Otherwise, you're just cultivating their independence on you as a coach as opposed to coaching them in their own thought and excavation process.

Kara: Right, totally. So, I think we've actually kind of touched on what some of these similarities are. But I mean we can maybe kind of flesh that out a little bit more. I think obviously on some level any good therapist, any good coach is just sort of trying to help people have a little easier time being a human in the world.

Mollie: Yes. I think both of them are doing the job of turning up the slow dimmer switch of our awareness. Neither one is the light switch. The coach who trained me described the big difference between therapy and coaching as, he's like, "If you think of therapy as termites, think of coaching like a buzz saw."

Kara: Both of these metaphors, seem – wait, I don't even understand. What does that mean?

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

Mollie: It was just the culture I was raised in. I then had to deviate from that.

Kara: No. Okay, maybe this is because I lived in New Orleans where there are termite swarms where once a year they swarm out of the walls to go make new colonies and it's horrifying.

Mollie: It sounds like a nightmare, my God.

Kara: But that's what I'm thinking about. So, can you explain this metaphor, how is this?

Mollie: Yeah, in the way that he described it. But termites do the slow work of eating away. I mean it's a terrible metaphor, eating away the integral structure of the house. But the buzz saw just gets it done. I think he's just thinking too that these are tools for a similar purpose, but there's a different degree of efficiency. I'm not endorsing.

Kara: They both sound terrible to me.

Mollie: Right. I'm not endorsing this. This is the conversation about it.

Kara: Well, I think what we're saying is sort of, if we think about the spectrum that I posited that's sort of like there are places where coaching is not going to be the only thing you need for sure. And then there's places where you need, people need psychiatric support, therapeutic support, whatever, in addition to whether they have coaching or not. Then there's places in the middle where you could probably take this problem to a coach or a therapist and either one might be helpful to be a different approach.

And then there's the part that's sort of like, well, I mean depending on the therapist it might be like, you're really good to go. But you are sort of really trying, it's much more sort of like, I want to become this different future

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

version of myself, I want [inaudible] coaching specific tools. Although once again, if you are a therapist who does that work, some therapists do that work too. But we're just making broad generalizations. So, I think what they have in common though is like you said, there's the bringing up awareness.

I think of it as being human is a skill. We're all just human, we can become more skillful at navigating the human experience. And I think that's what a good therapist or a good coach is helping you do. And there's also bad coaches and bad therapists. I mean this is all relevant, obviously it's all subjective.

Mollie: This whole episode should just be called broad generalizations.

Kara: Yeah. Broad generalizations that are all subjective anyway. But we've got to use them to be able to talk about anything. That's my coaching philosophy in general. It's all made up but also we can't communicate if we don't use the words. So, I think it's like a good therapist, a good coach, they are both creating awareness. I think generally good therapy also and good coaching are helping you develop a more compassionate relationship with yourself.

Mollie: Sure. I think they're both looking to return the dignity of choice as well and having a more compassionate relationship allows you the ability to do that, a little bit more agency in your own world.

Kara: Yeah. So, creating more self-compassion, more empowerment, more that sort of, of recognizing your own agency.

Mollie: Right. And a sense of how to work with the human curriculum as opposed to try to change it, or work against it, or transcend it. How do I work in concert with this thing? I think that's the therapeutic and the coaching conversation.

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

Kara: Yeah. And I think there's thought awareness. We talked about but then there's also just making peace with being a human who has emotions I think is something that happens in both disciplines is an important part of things. I think again, our sort of the thing we keep coming back to is this is not an either or, it's not a this or versus this. I think that also you're right, that it happens, I do see it more. And I think I even used to be more this way. When you're just starting out with something, and thought work, coaching.

If you have whatever you call it, some people would call it a spiritual awakening. That's not my language. But when you basically discover that you can change the way you think and feel and not everything you think is true. It's a very destabilizing experience. And it's still pretty non-mainstream. So, for me, if you're in a position like I was or you were where you're going from a very licensed, credentialled, mainstreamed field, which also lawyers didn't used to be licensed, and credentialled, and mainstreamed either.

All of these professions, only in the last 150 years sort of mainstreamed themselves. But now it's very hierarchical and very credential focused. So going from all of that to being, "I think that actually I believe that I can decide how to feel, and other people don't cause it and also I'm going to be a life coach.

Mollie: Right. You have to be a cowboy to make that move.

Kara: Yeah. You kind of lose your shit a little bit. And it's very destabilizing and especially if you are coming from a kind of very different place, I think it's natural that you then, like you said, become both evangelical about it but also very defensive about it. And it's like you feel you need it to be the answer. And that is part of that development is getting to the place where you're like, "There is no one answer." I don't know.

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

But there's people out there solving their problems with astrology, or feng shui, or numerology, or kabala, or coaching, or therapy, or philosophy, or ketamine. Or I don't know. People are solving their problems in a lot of different ways.

Mollie: Yes, all sorts of creative ways. Let's take all this off the pedestal. I love that.

Kara: Yeah. And none of it has to be the right one. And so, I would say if you're listening to this, because often this comes up and people want to get coached on, well, what do I do? How do I talk to my friends or my family about coaching? Or how do I tell people about this? They think it's crazy or they don't agree. And I'm just like, "Okay, they don't have to." You don't have to go out there and convince everybody that everyone should do thought work and join The Clutch. It's not for everybody and that's okay.

Mollie: Right. One of the things I'm feeling compelled to do at the moment is just make the plug and kind of congratulate those that do make the pivot from therapy to coaching, not because that's a better move. But because in this culture it's a revolutionary move, especially for those of us that are overachievers, who really identify ourselves based on our accomplishments and our credentials, in this culture to surrender the credentials.

And say, "You know what? There's a conversation that I want to have." That for me at least, I couldn't have with the credentials, that some people totally can and power to them. But to say, "I'm going to prioritize the conversation I need to have over the sense of achievement that I get from the safety of this." It takes some balls, it really does. One of the difficult practices I work on, and this is a, I guess you could call it a spiritual practice or a human practice, whatever the fuck you call it.

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

But when someone comments on my Instagram, this is my worst nightmare when someone's like, "I only listen to credentialled people. You don't know what you're talking about." And I have to take a breath and not respond and include the possibility that some people are going to think we've lost our edge if we've gone to coaching, or that we don't know what we're talking about, or now we've lost our credibility. And we just have to include that in the process. Or at least a type A brain like mine, it's a heroic thing to not respond to that and be like, "I used to be out there."

Kara: Yeah, totally, even though it's just so hilarious because if you went to any institution of higher learning you're like, "Yeah, there are some brilliant people there and there are some idiots there just like anywhere else."

Mollie: Absolutely, absolutely. And there are some phenomenal people who are licensed and unlicensed, truly.

Kara: But I can totally see how that's – I mean it was very – I did a lot of thought work to go from a high social capital career to this one. But once I'd made the – I can see how it's – but it's still different because it was sort of like once I did that it sort of just like – if I'd said I was leaving to become a social worker, I probably would have gotten the same reaction maybe. I don't know. Life coach is even weirder. But I can see how going from therapist to coach it's like sibling rivalry. It's sort of so much closer. It's like that could actually be a harder transition.

Because we're always most – it reminds me when you go to one country and the people they're always the most mad at are the country that's right next to them, who are very similar. And when you travel across the border, on one side the cab driver's like, "Can you believe those people on the other side who are x, y, z?" And then you get in the cab when you cross the border and that guy's like, "Can you believe those people on the other side who are x, y, z?" It's the same shit.

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

That sort of therapist coach going from lawyer, professor, to coaches just are like, who knows, you've just lost your mind but we don't even think about that. Whereas you have your former colleagues, it's like you're so much closer kind of. I can totally see that. But also, it's – I mean anyone who only wants to take advice from somebody who has a PhD in psychology should just stop listening to my podcast. They're probably not anyway. And how did you end up on my Instagram? I don't have a hashtag that says, psychology [crosstalk].

Mollie: A licensed clinical therapist.

Kara: What are you doing here? Go. There's therapists on Instagram I'm sure, go over there if that's what you want.

Mollie: Absolutely.

Kara: So where can people find you if they want, speaking of Instagram, if they want to find you?

Mollie: Sure. They can find me @molliebirney or molliebirney.com. That's it. That's good.

Kara: Go follow her on Instagram, I share Mollie's stuff all the time, that's how I found her. And then I slid into her DMs. And I was like, "Come on my podcast."

Mollie: Just like that, that voice. That's the one you used.

Kara: That voice, I did a voice audio, come on my podcast and now we're friends. Thank you so much for coming to talk about this, this is such a much needed topic I think. So, I'm glad we got to talk about it.

UFYB 230: Therapy v. Coaching - How to Know What Help Works When: A Conversation w/ Mollie Birney

Mollie: My pleasure, truly, thank you.

—

If you're loving what you're learning in the podcast, you have got to come check out The Clutch. The Clutch is the podcast community for all things Unf*ck Your Brain. It's where you can get individual help applying the concepts to your own life.

It's where you can learn new coaching tools not shared on the podcast that will blow your mind even more. And it's where you can hang out and connect over all things thought work with other podcast chickens 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/theclutch. That's unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. I can't wait to see you there.