

CRaDLe (Career, Relationship, Dating, Life) Coaching for the Young Woman

A Thought Leadership Article

By: Adina Morris

Coaching as an industry has developed over the last number of decades and most recently in the last ten years. It has catapulted to the forefront of how we live all parts of our lives. Coaching reaches all areas of life and business and the ways to achieve success and meaning in each client's life. From executive coaches in top Fortune 500 companies to health and wellness coaches, transformational coaches to spiritual coaches, coaching is finding its way into the fabric of everyday life in the 21st century.

My experience with young women over the last 10 plus years, from their stage of seniors in high school through the first few years of career and marriage, shows that coaching is most supportive and pivotal to this population in particular. What is unique about this population is that they are at a crossroads in their lives, where they are making crucial decisions that will have repercussions in every facet of their life here and forward. Not only are they at a critical time period, but they are also juggling multiple decisions simultaneously that affect each and every other decision as well as have far reaching ramifications into their future. As women, they are unique in the opportunities that they face at this juncture: creating a career path, choosing a job and place to live to meet that end, finding supportive like-minded individuals and building lifelong friendships and a personal support system, dating, courtship, marriage and children and balancing everything together in a harmonious and meaningful way that will give satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment in this world. I have coined the term of CRaDLe (Career, Relationship, Dating, Life) Coaching as it was born out of this multifaceted reality for many women. This type of coaching is geared to this population as it is sensitive to the unique challenges and opportunities that they face.

"The years between 18 and 50 are the center of life, the unfolding of maximum opportunity and capacity. But without any guide to the inner changes on the way to full adulthood, we are swimming blind. When we don't "fit in," we are likely to think of our behavior as evidence of our inadequacies, rather than as a valid stage unfolding in a sequence of growth, something we all accept when applied to childhood." (*Passages*, by Gail Sheehy, p.16)

Sheehy, in her book, *Passages*, discusses the different stages of adult development according to Erik Erikson. He referred to each stage as a "crisis." Sheehy contends that it is a crisis, not in the sense of catastrophe, rather as an "inner impulse toward change." (*Passages*, by Gail Sheehy, p.xvii) "'Crisis' connoted... a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential." (Ibid p.19)

During these stages of development, women and men go through different passages. For women, she continues, "this inner realm is where we register the meaning of our participation in the external world....We ...in each passage from one stage of adult life to another, must shed some of our protective

structure, which leaves us temporarily exposed and vulnerable....We might also feel panicky and retreat, or ignore the impulse to change and remain stuck in our shells....We must decide between progression or regression.” (Ibid)

Inaction is an actual choice not to choose. When we decide not to choose or move forward, we are actually regressing and moving backwards. In life, we are moving up or down, there is no stagnancy. Therefore, if we do not move forward and progress, we are actually moving backwards and regressing.

“Times of crisis, of disruption or constructive change, are not only predictable but desirable. They mean growth.” (Ibid p. 31) Sheehy contends that these moments of “crisis” are a positive forward movement of growth necessary for each individual to progress into adulthood.

The population of young women from the stage of seniors in high school through the first few years in the workforce and marriage go through simultaneous stressors different than other people at different stages. They are just getting their foot out the door from the safety net of home. They are trying new experiences and meeting new people. They are exploring the world around them as well as just beginning to uncover the vast world inside of them. These women are making career choices, friendships, relationships, dating and marriage decisions. They are contemplating all of these areas of life at the same time, at a relatively young age; all while deciding on the direction, meaning and significance of their life and their contribution to their community and society at large. It is as if these young women have a “messy room” with so much stuff thrown around the floor all mixed up. It is their job, although they have little or no training in how to clean it in a short amount of time, to sort through each item, find its proper and most opportune place thereby creating a neat and orderly room in which to laugh, live, love and work. The “messy room” is a multitude of stressors often creating paralysis and overwhelm and therefore leading to circular thinking and the inability to act. And the vicious cycle continues.

What is unique about this stage in particular is that there is no natural progression; it is unique to each individual as to how to make order of their “messy room.” Which decision must be made first is an individual choice; there is no right or wrong answer. Each person must look within themselves for the inspiration that drives them personally. Whether they marry and or have children first or later, whether they choose to get a college degree and or a master’s degree right away or delay it or whether they choose where to live based on proximity to family, friends or career. In childhood, as Sheehy mentions, there is a natural progression of development that each child is expected to follow. However, when it comes to the first stage of adult development, the only predictable element is that all of these choices need to be made. There is no set textbook of how one chooses to go about making them, and in what order. There is no set manual to follow as in childhood development. Every individual writes their own chapter creating their personal story of life, which contributes to the larger story of our community, society and world.

Without clear understanding as to what they want to do in life, what they want to contribute to their community and society at large, and what they want to get out of life, all of these simultaneous

challenges and opportunities can create confusion therefore causing the young woman to make poor, inefficient and ineffective choices. The circular thinking comes out of the connection that each decision has to the others and the confusion of which decision is of greater importance over the others, when each is truly important. This can lead to paralysis and inaction or even regression, therefore, stymieing growth, the essential development into adulthood at this stage.

When a young woman is starting to date and bond with other men and women hoping to create lifelong friendships, they need to know and understand what their beliefs and core values are. When a person is solid in understanding their beliefs, they will have much greater ease in deciding which friendships to pursue... as well as the ability to align their actions and behaviors with those beliefs. When starting to date, a woman will be more selective with whom she chooses to spend her time, picking only those who are aligned with her own value system, creating greater opportunity for finding the right person for her and avoiding unnecessary heartache and mistakes.

When deciding which career to pursue, the young woman has many opportunities before her. Through self discovery of how she can and would like to contribute to her community and society at large she will make optimal choices and reach greater success and fulfillment in her career. Precisely because there is no set manual of proper order going about making these choices, it is crucial for the young woman to get in touch with her beliefs, values and strengths therefore garnering greater clarity as to what order and priority each decision would optimally work for her. When she is aligned with her beliefs, and her actions reflect those beliefs, she will start to achieve her goals quicker and attach greater meaning and significance to what she does. A person who has greater meaning and feels significance in what they do will achieve their greatest potential while leading a truly happy and fulfilled life. This will occur with better choices made and less devastating mistakes along the way.

I use a coaching model I created uniquely for these women. As mentioned earlier, the CRADLE model evokes a sense of safety and care while reaching out to them in their challenges of CRADLe: Career, Relationship, Dating and Life. Through the coaching process of creating self awareness, discovering their core and aligning actions and behaviors with those core beliefs and values, I support these women early on. CRADLe coaching support enables the young woman to get on and stay on track for success.

Research was conducted in 2007 by: David L. DuBois, Ph.D., of the University of Illinois at Chicago through MENTOR, a national organization developing and supporting a national network of affiliate *Mentoring Partnership*. *Mentoring Partnerships* serve a unique role as a clearinghouse for training, resources, awareness, and advocacy, providing the critical link between MENTOR's national efforts and local organizations and programs that foster and support quality mentoring relationships. (mentor.org)

Author David DuBois, with the Research in Action Series published by MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2007 focused in part on the [Effectiveness of Mentoring Program Practices](#). This study showed a number of factors that make for effective mentoring of youth. To name a few, the practice of training is crucial for the mentors to be effective as well as the follow up post mentoring with the youth.

What is fascinating is that these are two among the main principles for effective coaching. One, it is in best practice to be trained to coach others, and two, the follow up and accountability that coaching offers is crucial to the sustained success of the coaching. When the coaching client knows that there is someone who cares, is interested in their success and follows up with them and holds them accountable for their actions, the coaching is more effective over longer periods of time.

In a private survey I conducted of 16 women in their mid 20's discussing the challenges they faced at the tender ages of 18-21, these were the most poignant mentioned; finding themselves, what their core values were and defining them well in order to balance the culture around them, making new friends, keeping or dropping old ones, balancing relationships with family members as they become more independent, as well as deciding on career paths and decisions regarding dating and marriage. Any one of these items causes stress on its own. However, dealing with all of these issues simultaneously can feel confusing, overwhelming and paralyzing or can push one to make poor choices under duress.

What can also cause paralysis is that each of these major choices affects the others. Where they choose to go to school, to the possible peer relationships they will make, to the career they develop, where they live, the job opportunities available and the potential for finding a suitable spouse are all interconnected and happening in the here and now of a span of a few short, impressionable and crucial years. This developmental stage into adulthood can feel extremely vulnerable, as the young woman has to put herself out there among peers, members of the opposite gender and in the work place in order to find opportunity.

They may feel vulnerable to their situation. Things are happening to them, and they experience little or no control. They may feel vulnerable to their environment. They feel trapped at every turn and become accustomed to making reactionary decisions in a crisis, feeling their back against the wall. They often do not have a safe place to express their frustration and a place to clear their minds and sort through everything effectively. This creates a situation where it seems to the woman that it is impossible to make the most effective choices. What is vital to understanding this population is that these simultaneous stressors are happening within a very short span of time and at a relatively young and impressionable age.

In Sheehy's work, she discusses the normal stages that people go through in life and that they may be seen as crisis, as Erikson refers to them, however they are really the natural progression and development into adulthood. What is critical about this stage, different than other stages, is that this population is young and inexperienced to the ways of the world and they have a multitude of choices to make that will strongly not just impact but dictate a large portion of what the future holds for them. Another element that Sheehy mentions is that there is what she calls "life accidents" along the way. Things happen in life, like family crisis, relocation, divorce, sickness and death. When these "life accidents" coincide with the natural transitional stage of adult development, the stressors are greatly intensified, therefore making it even more difficult for the young woman to make clear and effective decisions.

Coaching offers a safe and judgment-free environment where the client can openly express herself and uncover her core beliefs. It allows her an opportunity to create her own action plan for what she wants to achieve and how she intends to get there. The coach as accountability partner helps her gain clarity through active listening and bouncing of ideas, however the coach reflects and asks powerful questions rather than advising. Through this clarifying process the client can align her behaviors and actions with her core beliefs creating a more successful and meaningful life. In essence, the coaching process gives the young woman the awareness and confidence in her own ability to be able to clean her “messy room” in the most effective way for her, through her gained self awareness and her ability to analyze and understand what works best for her. All this is done in a way that is aligned with her values and beliefs system.

When entering a coaching relationship, the young woman is in a vulnerable position. Although the coaching space can feel vulnerable, it is also a trusted and safe space, allowing her to open up more deeply with the intention of understanding and the possibility of success. Instead of allowing the situation to make her feel vulnerable, she is able to reframe her perspective and be vulnerable to the opportunity.

Through this new openness, creativity is born, visualizing possibility, and encouraging her to be proactive. These steps through the action of allowing her vulnerability, exposing who she is and what she would like to accomplish are all parts of a process that leads to empowerment. The potential for growth and success is tremendous if she can get past the disempowering vulnerability and use it in a productive place like coaching.

What came out in the focus group debriefing with these young women was that those who had an effective mentor, guide, teacher or clergy or some other support system in place, were able to push through and begin to uncover their inner truths. Some were able to find a safe place to really be themselves and open up to someone who would not judge them but allow them to ask all of the difficult questions without fear or embarrassment. Others felt their mentor was pushing their own agenda or were judgmental of their decisions. Some found appointed mentors through school who were not well trained, educated and or knowledgeable of the real world that they faced. When they did not have that vital support, they floundered and had to fend for themselves which made decision making more difficult as the choices before them were not clear. In some cases the choices they made were detrimental to their well being.

After the concept of coaching was introduced to the women, 100% felt that if they had had a trained life coach at that juncture in their lives who would consistently keep them accountable and allow them to talk through their “messy room,” without agenda or judgment, enabling them to make order of everything, they would have had more clarity as to what they wanted to do with their lives and who they wanted to be and be with.

When asked to compare how a coach may be more effective than a mentor or guide, they answered that when you work with someone who is volunteering their time, although they are happy to help, you feel bad taking their time or constantly calling on them for support, and sometimes they are hard to

reach and not available when you need them. This can create an even greater feeling of disempowering vulnerability for young women. There is also a lack of accountability and they may not be as vested in their advice as it came from the volunteer helper not herself. If they had a coach whom they paid for, they would be more vested in time and effort, knowing that they needed to be accountable to the coach, especially because they invested money and whatever decisions are made come from them and not from advice someone else gave.

One client I worked with in particular struggled with many questions about how her core beliefs would align with her choice of a place to live, career and a spouse. Did they have to match? How could they match? How could she function if they did not match? When looking for a potential spouse, how did he match up to those beliefs? When discussing different ideals with him, if he did not share those values, was he not really a good fit for her? When choosing a position, if the company culture did not match her core beliefs, would it be a healthy environment for her to be in, even if it seemed to be a good fit for her career wise? Where should she live? Did it depend on the job, proximity to family or to the opportunity to find like minded peers and a potential spouse? Where to start? Which question should be addressed first? Which was a priority? If all were important, which must go first? These were all questions she explored while deciding these various life choices simultaneously. Through coaching she uncovered some underlying beliefs that were, in her words, “lies!” She also discovered that some of her core beliefs were so strong and important that they did dictate the when, what, where, why and how of her other decisions. She often related how the coaching process was a wonderful opportunity for her to explore in an objective, judgment-free and real place all of her many conflicting thoughts and ideas, and to process them each one at a time in an effective and efficient manner, creating a successful and meaningful path in life.

This stage in adult development allows the person to become more independent and free in their thinking. They are evaluating all that they have been taught and choosing what their core beliefs are. As they go through this discovery process, at such a young and inexperienced age and in a very short amount of time, it can be very confusing. Within the walls of the university, in the dorms, classrooms and offices, lies the simultaneity of the challenges these young women face. My goal is to create a program to be implemented in universities and colleges throughout the country to support our young women as they navigate through this next exciting chapter of their life’s story into adulthood. I am currently reaching out to local institutions in my home state of Michigan to start the process.

Having a coach who actively listens, clarifies, and reflects the client’s thoughts, in that safe coaching space allows the client to sort through their “messy room,” even in the event of collision with a “life accident.” When the job is complete for the time being, the satisfaction is much greater, because the hard work was done by the client. They chose the plan of action, therefore creating stronger commitment and longer sustainability. The CRADLe coaching process supports the young woman in becoming self-aware and builds her confidence in her ability to discover her beliefs and values. She can then align them with her actions and behaviors, thereby creating the optimal conditions so she can be a unique contributor to her community and society at large as an empowered woman, wife and mother.

References:

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