

# Coaching vs. Counseling

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Screening for Successful Coaching Engagement



Since coaching is a more palatable concept than counseling, clients are increasingly seeking coaching as their first line of attack to address their life dissatisfactions. While counseling and coaching are both on the personal development continuum with a similar goal to improve people's lives, they are starkly different. It is crucial to note that they focus on very different aspects of people's personal growth, are meant to target different goals, and they generate different outcomes. Coaching focuses on thinking and behavioral change, counseling on emotional change. Without awareness of differences, they can be confused.

Coaches, like counselors, are ethically responsible to understand the difference between the two disciplines and draw clear boundaries in their own businesses, as clients likely would best benefit from one service rather than the other. However, coaches and therapists like the general public struggle with

*Research suggests that 25% of those who seek coaching have high levels of psychological distress and are not ready for coaching*

gaining clarity on the question "Is this a coaching or a therapy client?" Since there is a grey zone between the two fields, both sets of professionals tend to underestimate the distinctions between them.

In addition, both sets of professionals may approach the choice from a different perspective and belief system. Most coaches may state that all individuals are coachable by focusing on people's strengths and goals. This approach is likely to apply to approximately 75% of those who seek coaching, but coaches are responsible to identify the remaining 25% that research (Dulude 2012, and Grant 2007) find are not ready for coaching due to high levels of psychological distress. Therapists are likely to say "Everyone could benefit from therapy." They may not recognize the 75% of those who could be coachable and do not need therapeutic interventions. It is fair to state that caring about the client, allowing the client to express strong emotions, as well as having them set goals, are not sufficient to insure the client's desired outcome will be achieved. While coaches and counselors use some of the same tools (active listening, reframing, positive inquiry, etc), they are applied differently.

## Defining Counseling/Therapy

Defining counseling/therapy/psychotherapy is no easy task. While some would state that they are meant to focus on resolving issues related to the "past" of a person, we would like to introduce a broader perspective. We suggest the following; the use of counseling/therapy/psychotherapy is **not** limited to the past issues of a person. Counseling processes can also be focused on the client's present and their anticipated future. Counseling, however, is focused on a person's psychological and inter-personal dynamics, and how those interfere with a



person's sense of self-worth and ability to create a stable and meaningful life. These troublesome psychological dynamics may stem from past traumatic experiences, or they could result from deeply ingrained belief systems, faulty personality structures, or recent trauma. Counseling is the modality well selected to achieve the following: healing, to find peace and closure for historical issues, to transform one's victim role to that of survivor, and to diffuse the triggers and emotions attached to painful events. Counseling or therapy is designed to transform emotions such as shame, sadness, and anger, and introduce the concept of empathy for self and others in order to rebuild self-worth. Re-establishing self-worth may be the best measure of success of counseling!

## Counseling is best suited in circumstances where the client is:

- Unable to remain grounded emotionally (high emotional distress, debilitating anxiety)
- Feeling disempowered about their own destiny.
- In the acute phase of grief for the loss of a person or a way of life (relationship, job, financial bankruptcy)
- Struggling with a long history of interpersonal conflict (aggression, violence, lack of empathy, poor problem solving, inability to maintain meaningful personal relationships)
- Presenting with a history of poor self-esteem and shame (self-loathing, self-deprecation, feeling easily attacked or blamed, defensive, avoidant of relationships)
- Disclosing a prolonged history of lack of personal success (unemployment, repetitive job loss, financial, relationships)
- Reporting a history of trauma with active triggers
- Relapsed and actively engaged in their addiction (alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, food)
- Lacking the ability to trust in relationships
- Experiencing debilitating anxiety, depression, or bipolar disorder, and are in need of biochemical support.



False assumptions are often made about the counseling process. Some of those are that clients will explore their dysfunctional behaviors and overwhelming feelings, and that the process will be slow and painful. We could argue that there may be truth to this perspective as counseling clients may have sunk to such a level of emotional distress prior to reaching out for help that recovery may be slow. However,

depending on the presenting problem, the resilience of the person, and the skill level of the counselor, a client may gain insight in their challenge and make great gains in a short period. Overcoming and resolving painful life events does not always engender a painful march to “hell and back”.

A sound counseling process will include client goals and measures of success along the way. However, since process is “king”, timelines to reach the goals are rarely designed. Therapy clients are held only partly and gently accountable, as they are considered emotionally fragile, at least early in the process, and are often not held to their own deadlines for achieving goals.

## Defining Coaching

Coaching emerged out of sports psychology, organizational psychology, business management, motivation theories, change theory, decision science, and other fields to help motivate and support people in their personal transformation journey. Coaches are trained to highlight clients’ personal resources and overcome obstacles in the pursuit of mutually agreed upon goals. The primary focus of coaching is to foster change in mindset, promote action, and engender success. This ultimately builds courage and self-confidence.

*A “coachable” client is someone who has the emotional and psychological availability to create a vision of his or her future.*

Contrary to the sports coach who creates the game plan and tells his players the strategies to use, the life and executive coach will expect the client to determine the goals and the sign-posts to measure success along the way. While the coach holds the client’s vision, the client can dive into action and trust that they will be supported to keep their focus on their desired outcome. The coach will hold the client accountable for straying afield “foul balls” along the way. A missed deadline will be challenged, and an unattended goal will be questioned. Accountability is a key ingredient to coaching.

Along the way, real or perceived obstacles are examined and eliminated through directed action. At times an emotional change may result, however contrary to counseling, this is not the primary goal. Action and success are what drives the process. With success in achieving personal goals, life satisfaction level increases.

A “coachable” client is someone who has the emotional and psychological availability to create a vision of his or her future, respond to positive encouragement, AND make behavioral and attitude changes. This person is unencumbered by the psychological distress caused by low self-worth or unresolved trauma. A coachable client desires and believes they are capable of creating meaningful change in their own life. While there may be self-doubt, lack of clarity in direction and low levels of life satisfaction, the coaching client still believes they have self-agency over their life.



A coaching client is someone who wants to:

- Make empowering decisions
- Master change
- Maximize personal potential
- Bring clarity to life vision
- Improve personal effectiveness
- Shift mindset from reactive to proactive
- Increase his or her life satisfaction level
- Learn to set and achieve personal goals
- Re-energize his or her life
- Overcome perceived obstacles
- Enhance personal awareness
- Develop new problem solving skills
- Increase levels of self-confidence
- Increase personal success
- Live within his or her values
- Increase the sense of self-determination



### Referring a Coaching Client to a Therapist

The ICF Code of Ethics Sec. 3 (20), (21) states that coaches need to be aware when a client would be better supported by a health professional or community mental health agency, and should make that suggestion to the client when appropriate.

While coaches are not required to be trained as mental health therapists, it is, in our opinion, crucial that coaches know when to refer to a mental health professional. Coaches can acquire this knowledge by learning the basics about mental health conditions.

Coaches will not know what they don't know until they start looking beyond their own body of knowledge, and become familiar with the basics of mental health. By becoming familiar with key factors of mental health, coaches will become better equipped to make decisions about referring clients to counseling as needed. A coach cannot act ethically unless he or she is fully informed and able to see the client as a whole. To assume that all clients are coachable and that all we need to do is to focus on the client's strengths, we would argue is a naive position that can leave coaches exposed to ethical dilemmas, and clients without needed mental health treatment.

## Screening for Coachability and referral to counseling

By introducing some basic screening questions, coaches will be better able to determine the readiness of a client for coaching. These questions are not meant for coaches to diagnose any mental health issues, but are meant to raise their awareness of the client's overall state of mind and the potential circumstances under which they would be best advised to refer for a formal assessment. These referrals can be made to a physician, psychologist, or any other type of professional licensed to diagnose those conditions in the client's state or province.

This skill set is crucial as it supports the ICF code of ethics, as well as directly impacts the overall success of coaching. Having skills and means to ascertain that a client is ready for coaching supports the ICF competence of "Establishing the Coaching Agreement".

## Referring a counseling client to coaching



A counseling/therapy client has successfully completed their treatment when they have re-established their self-worth, are well grounded in their interpersonal relationships, and have found their inner locus of control. Once a client has reached that point, they are most likely to feel that therapy is complete and seek to terminate the therapeutic relationship. An effective discharge plan may include a conversation about next steps, and positive life after therapy. In such conversations, clients may express, to their

counselor/therapist, the desire to embrace new challenges and broaden their personal horizon. This would be the perfect time to introduce the concept of coaching.

The benefit of referring to a coach at that point in the client's developmental process is that the coaching relationship is not encumbered by the painful stories that were overcome in therapy. It then can focus on the possibilities in the present and the future. By introducing a coach, a clear boundary is drawn between the pain of the therapy process and the new growth phase offered by coaching.

## Assessing the Grey Area

At times there are clients who appear to be in the "grey area" along the continuum between counseling and coaching. They have some unresolved issues of self esteem and locus of control, but they are able to manage in their job and relationships with little pain. They can identify goals easily, and make progress toward those without medication support. Determining whether these clients are "coachable" is a

skilled task. Their history of success or failure in reaching goal completion, and their ability to accept personal responsibility for their life, may determine whether they can be comfortable and successful in a coaching relationship.

Manon Dulude and Jeanne Erikson are committed to support the coaching community in learning to navigate this “Grey Area”. *“Screening for Successful Coaching Engagement”* is an ICF approved course which explores the challenges of the “Grey Area”. This series of three weekly classes will enhance your knowledge and abilities to discern the client who is most likely to succeed from counseling from the client who is most in need of counseling.

**Next sessions are scheduled to start soon**

For more information, or to register contact Manon Dulude at [info@forgecoachingandconsulting.com](mailto:info@forgecoachingandconsulting.com) or 905-873 9393

