

Coaching vs. Therapy: What Are the Differences and When Do You Refer?

Two of the most frequently asked questions of new coaches are, “What is the difference between coaching and therapy?” and, “When do I refer a client to a therapist?” There are many resources available to help answer these questions. Articles have been written on these topics in several coaching publications including Choice Magazine (www.choice-online.com), and the ICF has information about it on their web site, at www.coachfederation.org.

Tears and emotion can be scary for the beginning coach. Tears and emotion do not necessarily mean a person needs therapy, it merely means they have feelings. Feelings are a normal and healthy part of being human. As Co-Active® Coaches we bring awareness and curiosity to the emotions of our clients so that they can make better choices and move into action. We are present with our clients in the current expression of their emotions and bring curiosity to that place, whether it's in our client's magnificence or in the challenging places of their inner and outer lives. As coaches, we don't deal with the psychological antecedent to the emotion — that is the realm of therapy. If tearfulness, moodiness and depression continue over time and do not end, then the coach should bring this to the attention of their client and together explore the need for outside therapy.

Discovering that there is something that should be addressed by therapy is a positive coaching outcome, and as coaches, we refer clients to therapy when needed. There are many possible scenarios in this situation — one is that the coach holds the client accountable to finding a therapist and completes the coaching. Another is that the coach, client and therapist design an alliance whereby the coaching continues and the client works with a therapist at the same time.

Following is some information about the differences between coaching and therapy and also some guidelines for when to refer to therapy. The information below is a small part of what is available industry wide. We recommend that in addition to reading this, you do your own research on these topics.

Differences Between Psychotherapy and Coaching

Coaching	Therapy
Views both parties as naturally creative, resourceful and whole.	More apt to view clients from a medical model.
Does not diagnose or treat.	Diagnoses and treats.
Trained to work with functioning clients.	Trained to work with major mental illness.
Works with clients that are able to form an alliance and have common goals.	Works with clients with entrenched problems.
Co-Active® model.	Therapist the “expert.”
Coach and clients on a peer basis.	Hierarchical difference between therapist and clients.
Alliance designed by coach and client together.	Treatment plan largely designed by therapist.
Focus on evolving and manifesting potential.	Focus on healing and understanding.
Emphasis on present and future.	Emphasis on past and present.
Action and being oriented.	Insight oriented.
Solution oriented.	Problem oriented.
Explore actions and behaviors that manifest high self-esteem.	Explore genesis of behaviors that create low self-esteem.
Regard and coach negative self-beliefs as Saboteurs (temporary obstacles).	Analyze and treat origins and historical roots of negative self-beliefs.
Coach and client ask: “What’s next/what now?”	Therapist and client ask: “Why and from where?”
Works mainly with external issues.	Works mainly with internal issues.
Discourages transference as inappropriate.	Encourages transference as a therapy tool.
Accountability and “homework” between sessions held as important.	Accountability less commonly expected.
Contact between sessions for accountability and “wins” expected.	Contact between sessions for crisis and difficulties only.
Uses coaching skills.	Uses therapy techniques.

It should also be acknowledged that the difference between some types of therapy and personal coaching aren't always clear-cut. Many therapists are “coach-like “ in their orientations and the two do share some common ground.

Both disciplines can be working with fully functioning individuals/couples who are facing difficult situations. Both professions focus on helping people makes changes and accomplish goals that really matter to them. Let us examine some of the similarities.

Similarities Between Psychotherapy and Coaching

Coaching	Therapy
Uses a "Discovery Session."	Uses a Diagnostic Interview/History.
Uses many skills similar to therapy.	Uses many techniques similar to coaching skills.
Works with the client's whole life.	Works with client's whole life.
May work with emotional material.	Often works with emotional material.

Having looked at some of the differences and similarities, we assert that there are a few very important discerning questions to ask client and professional to further clarify this issue. Often the difference between the two modalities rests more in the "stances" of the two professions than in the techniques used.

- How is the client viewing the professional?
- What is the client coming for?
- How is the professional viewing the client?
- What is the role the professional sees for him/herself with this client?

As two professions working side-by-side, it is important to appreciate both our similarities and our differences and to continue respectful dialogue. As coaches we are also ethically bound to develop guidelines for when to refer to therapy. In addition to being aware of Coaching Standards of Conduct and Ethics, we encourage coaches to develop guidelines for referral. Below are some guidelines or "red flags" we have identified:

Guidelines for Referral to Therapy

- The client has an active mental illness (depression, acute anxiety, etc.)
- The client has a substance abuse problem
- The client is in a situation characterized by emotional or physical abuse or threats of abuse*
- The client has mentioned thoughts of suicide or attempted suicide*
- The coach feels as if (s)he is coaching outside his/her limit of competency
- The client shows no movement

* In some states/countries there are laws that require breaking confidentiality and reporting attempted suicide and/or abuse (especially child abuse) to specific agencies. Know the laws in your area.