

Differences Between Psychotherapy and Coaching

Coaching	Therapy
Views both parties as naturally creative, resourceful and whole. Does not diagnose or treat.	More apt to view clients from a medical model. 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.