

# Coaching Versus Counseling: What's the Difference?

With so many reality TV shows highlighting life coaches, you may be asking yourself what is coaching and how is that any different from therapy? Simply put, coaching is helping people create and put into action a specific plan to achieve their goals. Now you may be wondering how that is different from therapy. After all, therapy also involves setting goals and making changes in your life. The primary difference is that therapy is designed to help you to explore and heal the emotional and psychological reasons you are struggling to achieve those goals; coaching is focused on developing and implementing a strategic plan for success. Of course a good therapist will also help you to achieve goals and a good coach may point out some emotional roadblocks to success but in general the primary focus of each service is different.

For many people the choice between coaching and counseling will be a matter of preference. As a mental health professional, I am acutely aware of the many benefits of therapy for even those who are not dealing with a diagnosable mental health disorder. Therapy helps individuals, couples and families address a wide range of issues and meet their goals. However coaching can be a useful short-term alternative especially for those that struggle with the stigma that sometimes comes with seeing a therapist. For many people the choice between counseling and coaching will simply come down to personal preference.

## **Here are a few additional guidelines to help you decide if coaching is for you:**

- Coaching does not explore the underlying emotional and psychological obstacles to success. Coaching clients are those who already understand how their emotional and psychological factors influence their behavior and have been successful in addressing and managing those issues.
- Coaching is most successful when there is a concrete goal to be achieved. That does not mean that you must know exactly what the solution is -- part of the coaching process is to help you explore new ideas and move out of your comfort zone. If you know that your professional life is no longer fulfilling then coaching can help you determine what changes will help you get back to a satisfying career life. Maybe your relationship is just not as good as it used to be, coaching can help to clarify the areas that need improvement and work with you to implement a plan to address them.
- There are many professional and well-trained coaches out there, however it is important to remember that coaching is not a licensed profession. That means that anyone who thinks they give good advice can claim to be a life coach. Just as you would research your therapist or physician, it is important to ask for referrals and interview potential coaches before you commit to any kind of ongoing plan. There are credentialing agencies but no universal or specific regulations exist for these organizations so just because someone claims certification you should be aware that it is not a guarantee of their expertise. Of course it is also important that you like and respect your coach so even if you find a reputable coach, do not minimize your personal feelings when meeting them for the first time. After all, if you don't feel as though they are managing their own life well how much help can they offer you?
- If you are actively dealing with mental illness such as depression or anxiety, coaching may not be an appropriate option for you right now. In the same way that fitness coach helps you meet your athletic goals; a personal coach will work to help you reach your life goals. If you experienced an injury either before or during your time with a fitness coach, they would not continue to work with you; they would refer you to a physical therapist or doctor to repair the damage before continuing. Life and relationship coaching is the same way. If in the process of working on your set goals things become overwhelming or you feel that the issues you want to address are outside of the scope of your coach's expertise, don't be afraid to make a change. A good coach may even be willing to work with you in conjunction with a therapist or other health professional to provide an even more comprehensive plan of action.