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● Even though they look similar, **Patrick Williams**, Ed.D., MCC, tells us how coaching and therapy differ.

# COACHING VS. PSYCHOTHERAPY

## The Great Debate

**E**verywhere you turn these days, the question arises: what are the distinctions between coaching and psychotherapy? The debate continues. My views, as a long time psychologist and coach are expressed in the following.

Coaching, for both life and corporate advancement, is the hottest trend to hit the self-improvement scene. As it racks up amazing success stories, coaching seems destined to stay, becoming one of the most powerful personal and professional tools for sustained success. Yet, despite all the hoopla and excitement generated by coaching triumphs, there rages behind the scenes a great debate that continues to plague both the coaching profession, and those who would benefit from coaching. Simply stated, the question lingers, is it coaching — or merely a new-fangled therapy in disguise?

Coaching can look, to the uninformed public, like therapy because of its commonalities. They both seek to support the individual. They both are delivered in much the same way, through regular “face-to-face” or phone sessions. They both work to take a person from the place they are now, to a place they want to be. But the similarities stop there. Unfortunately, however, many people (those who have not been coached!) base their opinion of coaching only on these shared touching points.

The proliferation of psychotherapy in the 1970s and 1980s seemed to spawn an entire generation of “victims” — people who had something “broken.” We began thinking of the entire human race as “pathologized,” having need of mending for something or other. This rush to the sanctity of the therapist’s office produced an unfortunate backlash — a stigma associated with psychotherapy. Many people, even people who genuinely needed competent therapy, would not see a therapist because of the fear of being labeled or judged by family, friends and even professional peers. Sadly, that stigma seems to have remained behind in the recesses of our minds, keeping many hurting people away from the help they need. Coaching has burst upon the scene as a new way to seek personal or professional assistance with no stigma attached — especially for those who do not need psychotherapy, but the services of a partner such as a life coach.

It is helpful to understand that both coaching and therapy have the same roots. Modern psychotherapy is the result of a hundred plus years of research and contributions by some of the greatest minds in history. Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow are antecedents to today’s therapy practice — and modern day coaching. Adler and Jung saw individuals as the creators and artists of their lives and frequently involved their clients in goal setting, life planning, and inventing their futures — all tenets and approaches in today’s coaching. In the mid twentieth century, Carl Rogers wrote his monumental book, *Client Centered Therapy*, which shifted counseling and therapy to a relationship in which the client was assumed to have the ability to change and grow. This shift in perspective was a significant precursor to the field of coaching.

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Abraham Maslow’s work *Toward a Psychology of Being* set the framework, which allowed coaching to fully emerge in the early 1990s. All of these pioneers in the psychotherapy world helped make today’s therapy practice vital and refined — and set the foundation for current coaching practices.

The humanistic psychology movement of the past 50 years has permeated society at every level. Through the application of many years of theory about human technology, what used to be privy to the therapist’s office is now used by golf instructors, teachers, and other self-improvement gurus. Coaching was born as a result of great advances in psychotherapy and counseling, then blended with consulting practices, and organizational and personal development training trends (such as EST, PSI Seminars, LifeSpring, LandMark Forum, Tony Robbins and others). Coaching takes the best of each of these areas has to offer and provides a now standardized and proven method for partnering with people for success.

While therapy and coaching may share a common background, their differences are vast. Therapy is vital for those with psychological problems — what we call pathology. Coaching is for those who are healthy and already self-motivated. Both fields have their place and should not be confused. For advanced therapy patients, coaching can be an additional benefit, but coaching assumes the healing and well-being of its clients as a given. A therapist may add coaching skills to his or her practice, but a coach never engages in therapy. A coach is trained to detect any need for therapy and there are guidelines for when to refer a coaching client to a therapist. The table below is a quick way to see at a glance the basic differences between coaching and therapy.

This listing of differences could be extended indefinitely, but these are a basic summation. Essentially, a therapist is the professional with the answers to pain and brokenness; a coach is a professional partner to assist

and professionally. The coaching relationship allows the client to explore blocks to great success and to unlock his or her biggest dreams and desires.

Many former therapists have become coaches, bringing their rich and valuable training to the coaching profession. But this transition is difficult at times, because therapy and coaching ARE different. I was in Australia recently where I rented a car. The steering wheel was on the right side, making driving a challenge for me. The same skills to drive this car were required, but it felt uncomfortable for a while as I got used to driving in a different lane. It is the same for therapists transitioning into coaching. The same skills are required, but the lane is different and the steering wheel is on the other side — the client's side.

The truth is, coaching and psychotherapy do often look and sound similar. That is because many of the techniques and principles discovered in years

“...therapy is about uncovering and recovering, while coaching is about discovering...”

in discovery and design for growth. The shift from seeing clients as “ill” or having pathology toward viewing them as “well and whole” and seeking a richer life is paramount to understanding the evolution of coaching.

I often say therapy is about uncovering and recovering, while coaching is about discovering.

A good way to view the foundational differences between therapy and coaching is to think of two cars driving along a sandy, wave washed shoreline. One car hits a log and breaks an axle, sinking deep into the sand. The other car swerves to keep from hitting the log, but in doing so also sinks in the sand. For the first car, the only hope is a tow truck and a week in the shop. It is broken and cannot go further. This is a therapy patient. The second car merely needs a push, a little traction under its wheels, and it continues its race across the sand. This is the coaching client.

Unlike therapy, little time is spent in the past with coaching, except for brief “visits” and then the focus is on developing the future. This philosophical shift has taken root in a generation that rejects the idea of sickness and seeks instead wellness, wholeness and purposeful living—both personally

of psychological research and application are useful in coaching. Masterful coaches do utilize skill sets from solution-oriented therapy approaches, cognitive and behavioral psychology and recent advances in positive psychology. But that does not make coaching the same as psychotherapy. A good golf instructor will use some of the same techniques and principles of motivation and learning.

As more people in the public sector begin to realize the great differences between therapy and coaching, and see more and more value in having a partner to promote self discovery and design for better living or better working, the shadow of the therapy stigma will disappear. Coaching will be seen in every organization and group, from the family unit to the largest conglomerates on the planet, establishing itself as the most powerful and effective tool for success in any area, and a springboard to purposeful living. ●

Dr. Patrick Williams, Ed.D., MCC, is co-author, with Deborah C. Davis, of *Therapist as Life Coach: Transforming Your Practice* (W.W. Norton & Company).

THERAPY	COACHING
• Deals with identifiable dysfunctions in a person	• Deals with a healthy client desiring a better situation
• Deals mostly with a person's past and trauma, and seeks healing	• Deals mostly with a person's present and seeks to help them design a more desirable future
• Helps patients resolve old pain	• Helps clients learn new skills and tools to build a more satisfying successful future
• Doctor-patient relationship (The therapist has the answers)	• Co-creative equal partnership (Coach helps the client discover own answers)
• Assumes emotions are a symptom of something wrong	• Assumes emotions are natural and normalizes them
• The Therapist diagnoses, then provides professional expertise and guidelines to provide a path to healing.	• The Coach stands with the client and helps him or her identify the challenges, then partners to turn challenges into victories, holding client accountable to reach desired goals.
• Progress is often slow and painful.	• Growth and progress are rapid and usually enjoyable.

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