

Coaching vs Therapy (excerpts)

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COACHING vs. THERAPY: Frequently Asked Questions

The Therapist

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CAMFT's Legal Department routinely receives calls from pre-licensed and licensed members who want to better understand the differences between coaching and therapy and whether it is lawful and ethical for pre-licensees and licensees to provide coaching services. Here are answers to the most frequently asked questions.

How is coaching different from psychotherapy?

Unlike the practice of psychotherapy, coaching is not regulated by the government. In other words, there are no state or federal laws nor regulations that govern coaching as a profession or define a scope of practice for those who offer coaching services. Any person can hang a shingle and label himself or herself as a coach. Coaching does not require a license, specific education, or experience. Within the past 20 years, however, professional associations such as the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the International Association of Coaches (IAC) have been established to help guide the practice. These associations have created standards for those who work and/or plan to work as coaches.¹

Since coaching is self-regulated as opposed to government-regulated, the practice of coaching is broadly defined. For example, according to the ICF, coaching is the future-focused practice of partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. Professional coaching focuses on setting goals, creating outcomes, and managing personal change.² The IAC defines coaching as a transformative process for personal and professional awareness, discovery and growth.³ According to the IFC, a coach is responsible for discovering, clarifying, and aligning with what the client wants to achieve; encouraging client self-discovery; eliciting client-generated solutions and strategies; and holding the clients responsible and accountable for meeting goals and creating outcomes. For these reasons, coaching often relates to career development, achievement, and advancement. While these definitions are instructive to a degree, the lack of a regulated scope of practice could make the boundaries of a coaching relationship somewhat nebulous.

Without a universally recognized definition of coaching, perhaps it is more helpful to explain what coaching is not and when the actions of a coach may constitute an unlawful practice. Legally, coaches are not psychotherapists. Pre-licensees and LMFTs who are considering working as a coach must understand how and why coaching is

distinct from the work of a psychotherapist. The practice of psychotherapy, whether as a marriage and family therapist, clinical social worker, psychologist, or professional clinical counselor, is defined under state law. According to Business and Professions Code Section 4980.02 (effective January 1, 2022), the practice of marriage and family therapy shall mean the application of psychotherapeutic and family systems theories, principles and methods in the delivery of services to individuals, couples or groups in order to assess evaluate, and treat relational issues, emotional disorders, behavioral problems, mental illness, alcohol and substance use, and to modify intrapersonal and interpersonal behaviors. This section of law also explains that the application of marriage and family therapy principles and methods includes, but is not limited to the following specific areas:

- Assessment, evaluation and prognosis
- Treatment, planning and evaluation
- Individual, relationship, family or group therapeutic interventions
- Relational therapy
- Psychotherapy
- Clinical Case Management
- Consultation
- Supervision
- Use, application, and integration of the coursework and training required by Sections 4980.36, 4980.37, and 4980.41, as applicable.
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As part of their educational requirements for licensure, LMFTs receive cross-cultural training, specific instruction in alcoholism and other chemical substance dependency, as well as psychopharmacology. LMFTs diagnose and treat severe mental illnesses such as: schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorders, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, autism, anorexia, and bulimia. LMFTs also routinely work within county mental health agencies, hospitals, prisons, and jails treating serious mental illness and alcohol and drug dependency. Unlike licensed psychotherapists or properly supervised registered associates, coaches do not have the legal authority and, therefore, may not lawfully diagnose or treat their clients' mental health illnesses. This is true regardless of whether a coach has received education and training similar to that of a psychotherapist. Furthermore, coaches may not delve into the past, provide a cure to a mental illness, or relieve mental and/ or emotional suffering. Coaches may not seek to resolve the deeper underlying issues that cause serious mental and/or emotional problems. A coach who addresses issues of mental health or relationships without being appropriately licensed may be unlawfully practicing medicine and/or psychotherapy without a license. For example, a pre-licensure who concludes a job or volunteer position as a properly supervised Registered Associate Marriage and Family Therapist, but continues to treat his or her therapy clients without proper supervision under the guise that he or she is doing "coaching" could be accused of unlawfully practicing without a license.

Do coaching clients have the same rights to confidentiality and privilege as psychotherapy clients?

No. There are no laws that ensure that information a coaching client shares during the course of a coaching relationship will remain private. This is another important distinction that explicitly distinguishes a coaching relationship from a psychotherapeutic one.

Are agreements for coaching the same as agreements for psychotherapy?

Since there are no laws or regulations that govern the coaching profession, and because coaching clients do not possess the same rights to confidentiality and privilege as psychotherapy clients, agreements for coaching services should differ from agreements for psychotherapy services. It is recommended that an agreement for coaching include, but not be limited to, the following: an explanation of what coaching is and what services are being provided, information about the parties' obligations, and an overview of the coach's credentials and qualifications. The terms of the agreement may cover methods of communication, the length and frequency of the coaching sessions, fees and any extra expenses, accepted methods of payment and time of payment. The agreement may also state that the services being provided do not constitute behavioral health treatment, counseling, or the practice of psychotherapy, and that a referral will be offered if these services are needed or requested. Finally, the agreement may comprehensively inform the client as to the limits of the relationship so that the client does not hold unreasonable expectations in regard to the relationship. For example, the agreement may explain that were the client to become involved in litigation, information revealed by the client could be discoverable as there is no "coach-client privilege" in California.

Does the malpractice insurance I have as a MFT pre-licensure or licensee cover my work as a coach?

No. Given that psychotherapy and coaching are distinct professions, a separate malpractice policy for coaching is required. However, liability insurance is available to coaches through CAMFT's affiliate CPH & Associates. For members who are covered by CPH and would like more information, contact CPH at 800-875-1911.

Conclusion

Coaching and psychotherapy are entirely different professions and should be treated as such by those who wish to work in either or both capacities. Coaches must understand that having the education and training of a psychotherapist does not authorize one to engage in work of a psychotherapist. Those who plan to offer coaching services should possess a clear understanding of how coaching and therapy are different, be able to explain those differences to potential coaching clients, and maintain proper boundaries with those clients to avoid allegations of practicing psychotherapy unlawfully. For more information about coaching versus therapy, visit the CAMFT website at www.camft.org and/or call CAMFT's Legal Department for consultation at 858-292-2638.

Sara Jasper, JD, is a staff attorney for CAMFT. Sara is available to answer member calls regarding legal, ethical, and licensure issues.