

Therapy and Coaching. What is the difference? How do you choose? Does it matter?

by Bryna Livingston, MSW, LCSW

These are questions that puzzle people as they try to decide what is the appropriate path to follow at a time when they are feeling vulnerable.

Therapy and coaching are two distinct paths. Often the paths seem to converge, but good therapists, and good coaches know the boundaries for each discipline.

One analogy that I like to use is that of the feeling of walking on thin ice. You may be familiar with this feeling. It may be one that you experience more often than not. On the surface, there may be nothing going on in your life that you can change to elevate the feeling of 'thin ice'. It's just a feeling that you have carried with you for as long as you can remember. Therapy may help you find the roots where the thin ice originated. In therapy you can look for the reasons why you have the feelings that continually send you on that thin ice. Therapy can help you identify hot buttons that are wired from the inside because of early experiences. These buttons often stop you from thinking rationally and cause untold stress in your daily life.

Therapy can help you see how your reactions and adaptations that you have made in your life were protective and made sense when you were young, but no longer are serving you. It can alert you to present situations that will trigger those feelings of 'skating on thin ice', and help you to make adjustments as you 'unwire' those hot buttons.

Working with a coach you will deal in present time. There you are, standing in the middle of a huge ice patch. You don't know which direction to turn, or even if turning is a good idea. A coach can help you sort out the next step and plan for a different future. A coach is usually a short-term solution to problems that deals with immediate issues. Career path has you baffled? Going through a divorce that has thrown you so off kilter that you are afraid that any decision you make will be a bad one? Just moved, and want help with the next step toward integrating into the community? Kids just left home and you have time now to decide what the next part of your life will look like?

The latter is a time when the two paths (coaching and therapy) may converge. If you are looking for the next step, that calls for a coach. If you are trying to figure out who you are, try therapy.

To go back to my analogy of 'thin ice.' A coach can help you off the ice. A therapist can help you plant your feet in solid ground and get to the roots of your being.

How to find a coach or therapist that will be a fit for you? There are some basic questions that you can ask each discipline. Are you licensed or certified? Where did you train? How long have you been doing the work that you are advertising? Do you have a supervisor or do you submit to supervision from a peer? What difference do the above questions make? You can be assured of a standard of training if a person holds a license or certification. There is a code of ethics that accompanies licenses and certification, and there is recourse if you feel you have been treated poorly.

When you are feeling vulnerable it is important that you contract with someone who you can trust. Friends are usually good resources, but your own gut feelings are your best barometer. I recommend that people interview me, or anyone that they are thinking of trusting with their story. No one person is a fit for everyone. You can do a short interview on the telephone. It is not unusual to make an appointment for one session and see how it feels. A good coach or therapist will support this. If they don't, ask why.

The path of life isn't easy, and we all need help at some time. It takes strength and courage to ask for help. I salute you on your journey.

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