

Which are right for me?

Self-Help, Coaching or Counseling

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Self-Help ?

It used to be considered a **rite-of-passage** many years ago for boys to learn how to fix their own car and girls to become a wiz in the kitchen. Times change! Cars are now so complicated that very few people have the skill, or time, to fix their own car; many women are so busy at work that they have to struggle to keep up with family obligations, let alone the latest elaborate cooking gadgets.

But while these skills can be learned, today it takes a **greater level of talent and focus**. Today we rely much more on **specialists** for many of the services we require.

So it is with mental/emotional self-help. It is **noble and uplifting** to help **yourself**, or a **friend**, through a rough patch, or to have simple curiosity as to your own **potential** for growth.

Perhaps you know that “**something isn’t quite right**” with yourself, but you are not ready to accept professional counseling; you just want to browse and explore some self-help options and get some ideas. Or, you know something is definitely wrong and you need to seek some type of relief. You may look for some specific help, or ask friends or family for recommendations. Or, you may have had, or are in, some form of coaching or counseling and you want to augment what you learned in the sessions.

Perhaps you are fed-up with the way your life is going. Or, you may want some useful exercises to combat **negative emotions** or bad habits or patterns. You may want to feel lovable or **less lonely**, build **life skills**, make **better choices**, manage your **moods** better, **find passion or purpose or motivation**, be your **ideal weight**, master **rejection or stress** or **self-empowerment**, and so forth.

While self-help can bring excellent results, we also have to recognize when we are **no longer able to make progress by ourselves**, when we are **not** getting good help from our friends and family, or when we may have **serious problems** that need a trained **professional** to help.

In short: we need to know what types of assistance are **appropriate** for our particular circumstances: self-help, coaching and/or counseling.

What is Coaching ?

The human potential movement and positive psychology brought coaching into the limelight in the 80s. Corporations used coaching to manage change stemming from downsizing, mergers and acquisitions. In the last decade we’ve seen coaching take off and provide people with tools to reach not only their **professional** but **personal** potential and goals.

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) defines coaching as the relationship between the Coach and their clients which **assists people in fulfilling (usually stated and specific) goals** and improving their quality of living. A Coach is basically a (trained and experienced) personal **cheerleader** who encourages, endorses, acknowledges and supports you until you feel

comfortable enough to maintain your goals fully on your own. **Lifestyle or Wellness Coaches** are like Sports Coaches or Personal Trainers, in some respects, but differ in many other ways. For example, they focus on helping you become a winner, not (usually) on your physical performance, but on **lifestyle and work-related goals**.

Coaching offers clients versatility. Coaches need to be excellent, active **listeners** in order to help their clients develop **insight** into their resistances and take the necessary steps toward positive change.

Most Coaches have some formal training but few carry the ICF Certification at this time. Coaching is a relatively young field and, as it grows, more Coaches will be asked to comply with ICF by-laws, re-certification standards and other requirements.

Coaching works best before and after psychological treatment (if such treatment is needed). It helps the client acknowledge their resistance to change and then, what they can do to reach their stated goals.

What is Psychological Counseling ?

A **Psychological Counselor, aka Psychologist**, is a trained (at an accredited school) and licensed (by the State) mental health professional that **may use one or more approaches** to helping their clients achieve some level of **self-understanding** and, thus, **behavior modification**. There are many different "schools" of mental health counseling thought, and many different mental health professions that can offer effective therapy. Today, most **Psychiatrists** (a Medical Doctor specializing in mental health) focus on symptom relief through **medication management** and usually do not do much talk-based therapy beyond ongoing medical and symptom assessment. The combination of medication management plus Psychological Counseling has been shown to be very effective for many of the more difficult cases.

Counseling is a **healing** process, usually talk-based, that occurs in a confidential, safe and trusting environment. The Counselor assists the client in problem solving by listening, reflecting back, exploring deep feelings and asking provocative questions. Counseling offers clients a unique opportunity to reflect on, understand, and challenge their irrational thinking. The client learns to accept themselves as they are through understanding and then to make fundamental behavioral changes for the better. The thrust of psychological treatment is to help the client find the strength to make these fundamental changes in order to cope with their unique challenges.

Some people think Counselors have white coats, beards and make their clients lie on a couch. This is (largely) a myth along with the misperception that counseling is "just for crazy people", the self-absorbed, or those that think they need many years of analysis. On the contrary, people usually seek counseling when they feel that **something is "wrong" in their life**, they feel they need **relief** but they can no longer help themselves or go to friends or family. This could be for interpersonal, work, or other needs. They need to receive an **impartial, objective, and professional**, point of view at this point in their life.

Treatment usually occurs in-person and weekly, but for many clients with less serious problems, effective counseling can occur online or on the phone and need not take a very long time to achieve results. Most health insurance policies offer coverage for psychological counseling sessions.

Even more recently, some **Psychologists** are finding that coaching can be a very useful **adjunct** for their patients both before and after psychological counseling in order to identify or sustain better behaviors and thoughts.

How to Choose Professional Help ?

There are a few basic areas where counseling and coaching differ. The subjects, goals, relationships, and treatments are not the same for these two helping modalities.

Traditional counseling mostly deals with discovering and understanding the client's **emotional pain of the past**, while coaching, for the most part, focuses on stimulating a person's **positive emotions** as it relates to their present and future **vision for themselves**.

Coaches are usually more focused on the client's **stated, specific, performance or life goals** such as positive functioning, achievement, focused action plans, and specific outcomes. In contrast, Counselors focus on **not always obvious deep feelings and ideas** and **identifying the causes of dysfunctional behaviors** (the understanding of which provides insight into positive behavioral change). They may work closely with a Psychiatrist, If warranted, for medication management which can be quite beneficial in some cases.

Counseling and coaching differ in the function of the client relationship: Counselors are **experts** and Coaches are **co-creative team partners**. The function of change in coaching is to make the process enjoyable and motivating for the client. In counseling, the process of change might be emotionally painful until the client reaches equilibrium at which time deep personal insight and, therefore, behavioral modification can be achieved.

There are several other distinctions between Coaches and Counselors: for instance, the amount of self-disclosure, who is responsible for the outcomes, and how payment is treated. With coaching, the Coach manages the process but the client is responsible for the outcomes. In counseling, the Counselor is responsible for focusing the client's outcomes so that the client achieves the required self-understanding.

Coaches can take classes and may be do an internship and continuing education, while Counselors must show years of coursework, a post-graduate degree, and pass state sanctioned licensing exams, plus take periodic, mandatory, continuing education. Many psychological counselors hold a number of additional certifications, e.g. Employee Assistance Programs, Substance Abuse, Eating Disorders, and so forth.

Both counseling and coaching can play a valuable role in helping you achieve your goals when self-help and friends are no longer enough. All methods have a useful role to play, and, in fact, work well together at appropriate times.

Choice Matrix

On the next page we give a Choice Matrix that can help you decide the appropriate level of assistance you want, need or require. All changes come, ultimately, from within.

Choice Matrix: Self-Help, Coaching or Counseling ?

	<i>Self-Help</i>	<i>Coaching</i>	<i>Counseling</i>	<i>Most Important to Me</i>
When to Engage	When I Need to Change Myself or Help Friend	For Specific Performance Related Goal(s); Need Direction + Support	Persistent Problems That Don't Remit; Sense Underlying Problem(s) That Impair My Normal Functioning; Need Validation + Relief	
Role of Other	Myself or Helpful Friend/Family Member	Co-creative Partner	Expert	
Method	I Study and Try Things	I Lead; Coach Assists/Enables	Counselor Assesses/Treats; I Reveal	
Focus	Symptom Relief	Performance Motivated	Bio/Psycho/Social/ Behavioral	
Primary Mode	Online/Print Materials, Tapes; Workshops, Teleconferences, Groups, etc.	Telephone, E-mail/chat, In-person, Readings, etc.	In-person, Telephone, E-mail/chat, Groups or Family, Readings, etc.	
Duration	Until I'm "Done"	Weeks to Months Until We Mutually Agree Goals Are Met	Weeks to Months Until Achieve Sustained Relief; Sometimes Insurance Coverage Limits Sessions	
Mood of Experience	My Own Curiosity Holds My Attention	Motivating, Positive	Insight Over Immediate Comfort	
Benefit/Advantage	Self-Acceptance, Knowledge, Control	Self-Awareness, Motivation to Change, Sustained Change	Identify and Treat Fundamental Issue Allowing Real Behavioral Change	
Training	No	Certificate; Internship; Certification	Accredited Program; State License; Continuing Education; May Have Additional Certifications	
Costs	Purchased Materials	Fee-for-Service	Copay, Deductible, Premium, or Fee-for-Service	
Takes Insurance	No	No	Usually	

Note: There are many schools/methods/techniques of counseling and coaching; we have given typical approaches for illustration. Success of any approach depends on you! ©2009 Arlene K Unger, PhD. All rights reserved.