

Q&A: Self-Help in a Coaching or Counseling Practice

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I am both a Clinical Psychologist (PSY licensure) and a Certified Wellness Coach in addition to being CEO of Real Psych Solutions, a Self-Help website. I recently provided a professional training session on the role of Self-Help in a Coaching Practice. Below is an expanded version of the Q&A session.

Three of my articles on Self-Help, Coaching and Counseling are available at <http://www.RealPsychSolutions.com>.

For Clients: "[How to Choose Between Self-Help, Coaching or Counseling](#)" and "[Practical Suggestions for Working with a Counselor or Coach](#)"
Note: These two articles (above) may be reproduced "as-is" and given to your clients.

For Professionals: "[What is the Role of Self-Help in a Counseling/Coaching Practice?](#)"



You've been involved in online Coaching and Counseling for several years. Why? What are the benefits? Pitfalls?

As people started to rely on, and get comfortable with, the Internet for more and more of their activities like shopping, social networking, information gathering, phone, entertainment/games/video, etc., there has been a natural, growing interest in, and comfort with, sharing personal information "on the computer."

Online services also became more attractive to Coaches and Counselors when cost-effective and easy-to-use functionality such as secure email/chat/conferencing, as well as online profile/publicity (some with online photos, video, etc.), screening, scheduling, billing, and payments became available.

Then, consumers found that they were able to get qualified professional advice in either real or asynchronous time for their common everyday concerns. Many clients find that working with online trained professionals is an ideal way for them to deal with life's challenges and to address personal issues.

Unlike face-to-face (which is necessarily geographically constrained) or telephonic (which--until the relatively recent advent of unlimited long distance--could be cost prohibitive) Coaching/Counseling consumers were now able to have access to a wide range of professionals throughout the globe using live chat, email and video conferencing.

Some online Coaching and Counseling sites support consumer anonymity (if desired) and they provide a secure and safe web environment. Their secure platforms also allow consumers options for pre-payment and most sites pre-screen consumers which is a definite benefit to the practitioner.

Many people enjoy the anonymity, 24 hr availability and affordability of online Coaching/Counseling services. Consumers don't have to worry about running into their Coach/Counselor "in public" and can explore their concerns right from the privacy of their home.

There are, of course, numerous *cautions* and *pitfalls*.

Who are you interacting with? Is the "28 year old female with mild depression" you are corresponding with really a 15 year old boy from Bulgaria? This is why working with an established organization that is experienced in pre-screening clients extremely important.

Some clients may have much more serious problems than *can, or should, be* dealt with via these indirect means (email, chat, anonymously, etc.). These issues can be handled with appropriate pre-screening followed by appropriate referral if needed.

Only certain Coaches/Counselors have the proper *skills*, and consumers the proper *attitude* and problems, to work online without face-to-face contact. Both parties need to focus very precisely on the identified problem; *there is no room for evasion, lack of honesty, or procrastination on either side*.

Nonetheless, many types of less serious lifestyle, adjustment, or wellness issues can be successfully handled by this technology.

The most critical aspect for success is assuring that the right clients and the right issues are handled by Coaches/Counselors with the appropriate skill set.

There are also a number of (unresolved) ethical, legal and business issues which can vary by license type, state and/or country, especially for licensed mental health providers.

I would strongly recommend that licensed Counselors who wish to do online Counseling work only through reputable, established referral agencies that can provide pre-screening, appropriate disclaimers, billing/payment, and secure communications for potential clients.

For this reason, online Coaching (and the issues that certified Coaches appropriately deal with) might be easier to deal with at this time.

What led to your desire to explore the role of Self-Help in conjunction with Counseling/Coaching?

Several of my clients were asking for Self-Help tools due to the economic downturn and/or loss of insurance. They wanted to continue to improve their situation, but were very short of cash and faced an uncertain future.

At the same time, my colleagues were looking for ways to augment their practices and wanted to publish articles and offer their clients homework, before, during and after Counseling. They were looking for tools and resources that they could readily access, e.g. through the web.

Of course there is a ton of "Self-Help" material on the web, but much of it isn't very good, and is not a panacea for every problem.

My husband Stefan Unger, PhD and I started Real Psych Solutions in February 2009 to provide high quality, practical Self-Help materials based on professional mental health Counseling and wellness/lifestyle/executive Coaching and to explain the appropriate roles for Self-Help, Coaching and Counseling.

In your article "How to Choose Between Self-Help, Coaching, or Counseling" you define each of the three types of assistance. Can you expand on this?

Self-help –

- Discovery by self-exploration, self-education and self-motivation
- Supports desire to change self or others
- Supports experimentation on the part of the client
- Encourages curiosity
- Investigates options for symptom relief

- Increases self-acceptance, knowledge and control
- Internet makes this easier because of search engines
- **Main Negative:** may not be appropriate for more serious problems and so may delay client seeking appropriate help
- **Secondary Negatives:** client may not have the skill set to find, or choose, the most appropriate Self-Help materials; some Self-Help materials are not authored by knowledgeable authors and are completely untested

Coaching –

- Derived from Human Potential Movement and Positive Psychology
- Coach assists client in fulfilling specifically stated goals and improving quality of life issues
- Provides tools and exercises to reach client's professional and personal potential/goals
- Involves cheerleading – encouragement, endorsement, acknowledgement and supports one's life and work-related goals
- Requires formal training/certification. Coaches are versatile and can work with a variety of lifestyle concerns
- Solution not problem focused (i.e. emphasis is on solving problem directly-- finding a workable solution--and less on solving underlying problems)
- Develop insights into resistive patterns and steps toward positive change
- **Main Negative:** failing to refer client with more serious underlying problems to appropriate Counseling or medical help

Counseling –

- Comes from cognitive, psychodynamic and analytical fields of thought
- Challenges irrational thinking and eliminate maladaptive behaviors
- Problem focused and solution oriented (i.e., much more emphasis on finding underlying problem and appropriate solution for long term change)
- Explore deep feelings and support regression through emotional ventilation and integration
- Works to help the client achieve self-understanding/awareness and forgiveness
- Encourage healing process and the ability to let go of maladaptive thinking and behaviors through thought restructuring and behavior modification
- **Main Negative:** insurance companies

Self-help is.... Self-help is not...

Self-Help is NOT (or cannot, or should not be)!

- An alternative treatment for serious or persistent issues
- A quick fix
- Just reading a few articles
- Chatting with a friend
- Attending an occasional seminar
- A simple support group
- An impulsive afterthought
- Avoidance of natural or negative consequence
- An escape from Coaching and/or Counseling
- An expectation to never feel bad or fail
- Going to work for client, even on simple problems without the proper attitude
- All created equal (some is written without any basis in fact, or may not work "as advertised")

Self-Help IS (or can, or should be)!

- An *adjunct* to Coaching and Counseling
- Active engagement
- An opportunity to act on or think about personal issues
- An opportunity to demystify the Coaching or Counseling experience
- A method for life skills and self-enhancement
- A source of taking responsibility for one's choices/actions/changes
- A way to add more meaning and understanding to one's life
- A form of self mastery and discovery
- An active learning process
- An approach to goal setting
- A lifestyle tool for self-improvement
- A way to reflect and solve personal issues
- A way to deal with daily issues

When to use Self-Help alone or in conjunction with Coaching or Counseling?

Self Help Alone – When the client:

- Doesn't have time or money for Coaching or Counseling
- Is ambivalent about the Coaching experience
- Is at a pre or meditative level for seeking Coaching
- Can't easily disclose to a close friend or family
- Doesn't want to return to, or work with, a Coach or Counselor
- Is considering seeking professional help but doesn't know where to begin first
- Is considering terminating treatment and looking at other options for support

Self Help – With the Coach/Counselor – When the client:

- Wants more tools tailored to their specific concern
- Feels unsatisfied with sessions, or is aggressive about "curing" their problem "as soon as possible" with "whatever it takes"
- Doesn't "feel" their problems are normal, but Coach/Counselor knows they are (Self-Help articles can show them that their problems are common)
- Has an issue that came up that may derail the client's Coaching/Counseling work but needs resources
- Is helping a friend or family member with another problem and wants some guidance, ideas
- Is aware that the Coach has written info for public consumption about his/her issue
- Is being discharged (for various reasons) but still needs continuity
- Complains about the cost of the sessions
- Wants to spread out their visits
- Mentions the need for more autonomy

What can a Coach or Counselor offer that Self-Help cannot?

- A professional perspective and experience from someone that has dealt with the similar issues of many other clients
- Relevant, known tools that might be more pertinent to the client's issue at hand
- Objectivity, motivation and focus
- Universality
- Understanding of the process of behavior change
- Reality based Coaching/Counseling strategies
- Increased motivation

What types of problems are best suited to Self-Help?

- Short term problems – problem or situation specific
- Simple versus complex problems (e.g. lifestyle choices)
- Popular issues - weight, exercise, simple depression
- Involving the Coping Style of the client
- Self-awareness level of the client is good
- Emotional sophistication of the client is good
- Client's Acceptance and desire for change are good
- Client's educational and motivational level are good

What topics/problems are appropriate for a combination of Coaching/Counseling AND Self-Help?

- Relationship, Exercise, Motivation, Parenting
- Client's Self-awareness of the client
- Emotional sophistication of the client
- Client's Acceptance and desire for change
- Client's educational and motivational level

What do you say to the Coach/Counselor who says, "But my client just wants me to tell them what to do"?

The Coach/Counselor needs to ask themselves:

- What if you can't be there for your client, e.g., the client moves away or quits, etc.?
- Do you want your client to investigate and learn things on their own or to be dependent on you?
- Do you want your client to feel empowered, self-assured and independent at some point?
- Do you want to promote curiosity and emotional maturity in your client?
- Do you expect yourself to know all the answers?
- Unless the problem is rather simple, just telling the client "what to do" is not going to elicit permanent change and is not really "professional."

*How does using/writing Self-Help materials help **promote** my practice?*

- Creating and selling Self-Help materials, tailored to the needs of the population you serve, gives you (free) publicity and adjunctive tools
- Recognition as being expert, community aware, and savvy
- Putting your Self-Help materials online increases your visibility and "authority" when potential clients are searching for professional help
- Demonstrates to client that you really want to help them by all reasonable means
- Clients can get "homework" based on reading Self-Help articles, which helps them gain self-awareness and understanding and provides talking points for future sessions with you
- Increases your value as a Coach/Counselor with new and existing clients
- Expands your knowledge of what your clients may be reading, and the trends they are likely to follow or discuss

What are your favorite Self-Help resources?

You can find lots of resources at our website <http://www.RealPsychSolutions.com>, especially on the Free Resources, Other Resources and Professional Resources pages.