

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF SELF-HELP IN A COUNSELING/COACHING PRACTICE?

by

Arlene K Unger, PhD

Clinical Psychologist (PSY 15383)
Certified in Wellness, Health and Executive Coaching

The Center for Empowerment
34052 La Plaza Dr #107
Dana Point, CA 92629
drarleneunger@gmail.com
<http://www.realpsychsolutions.com>
ph: 949-240-7302

One of the most popular articles at our consumer oriented Self-Help [website](#) is "[Self-Help, Coaching or Counseling: Which are right for me?](#)" This article explains the proper role and characteristics of each modality to consumers and clients.¹

Here I would like to discuss why effective Self-Help² is not a threat to your income or control, but, rather, why it is both a source of potential clients and an adjunctive tool that can augment your practice and provide better overall outcomes for your clients.

Why Self-Help is popular

It's simple: most people would rather figure things out on their own than go to a guru, Coach or Counselor. For example, a recent study by Deloitte found that "37% [of healthcare consumers said that] they are interested in using online tools that could help them assess, monitor and manage their health."

The average person, with average problems, innately wants to control their own destiny and, particularly, Self-Help allows them to do so. Or, at least, try to do so.

Most people prefer to recognize their own flaws and take the responsibility to make the necessary self-improvements. Most people try to talk to friends or try to recognize what is/was going wrong. Or, they go online with the intention of troubleshooting their own problems.

Online Self-Help can offer them: 1) the ability to identify their own problems, 2) the knowledge that are not alone and, 3) the tools for overcoming their faults and getting on the road to self-improvement.

¹ Coaching here refers to certified wellness or lifestyle or executive Coaching. Counseling refers generically to therapy by licensed mental health professionals.

² Effective Self-Help is more than passively reading an article; it's an active engagement involving exercises, worksheets, etc.

In fact, most people sense, at some level, what makes them feel calm and at ease. I have found that many of my patients innately know what they need to do to de-stress and refocus for their universal problems, but they may not be able to fully motivate themselves, or they may want to get validation from a professional.

However, for many others, it can be very hard to come up with rational solutions, or motivation, for coping; and some problems are, of course, way beyond their "innate" skill set to self-resolve. Self-Help should neither be self-delusional nor an escape from one's self.

Why Counselor and Coaches may be ambivalent towards Self-Help

Self-Help is a multibillion dollar industry so why do so many Counselors/Coaches feel skittish about referring their clients to Self-Help resources before, during and after the course of treatment?

Some Counselors/Coaches may feel that Self-Help is in competition with their own struggle to build their practice. After all, if a potential client is web-surfing to solve problems on their own, then they may not be coming to see a professional.

The answer is that "problem" is, in reality, a continuum of levels of seriousness.

Some "problems" are actually rather simple and just need a little focus and attention to solve, while some are terribly debilitating and refractory and cannot be cured with the best medication and therapy combined. These serious cases are likely not going to be seeking Self-Help, and they are not going to be successful if they try to "fix" themselves.

Since our profession is a helping profession, we should do the best for our clients and potential clients. If Self-Help will do the trick then that should be recommended in a proper and appropriate context. There is a proper place for Self-Help, Coaching and Counseling (see the article referenced above).

Some Counselors/Coaches may see Self-Help as a threat to their treatment process, thinking that their client will stray, prematurely terminate, or go off in a direction that would be counter to their therapeutic goals. Even with Counseling/Coaching, the human brain has a wonderful ability to quickly imagine different ways to deal with life challenges. Counselors/Coaches can facilitate best when they acknowledge that their clients, for the most part, are keenly aware of their coping skills and want to positively influence their own lives.

Effective Counseling/Coaching doesn't make the client feel powerless, or enable feelings of helplessness, but rather shows clients how to sidestep being controlled by outside forces and empowers them to direct their own lives toward more fulfillment. When a person is aware of how they cope, they can begin to see ways that they can intervene to make subtle life improvements.

Counselors/Coaches may see the inherent value in Self-Help but, they may see problems arise when their vulnerable patients try to take behavior change into their own hands. They also may be afraid that Self-Help may give their client the idea that **one size doesn't fit all and thus create more feelings of helplessness** or confusion. The key is to manage the Self-Help experience for the client.

How Self-Help can enhance Counseling and Coaching

Once the Counselor/Coach facilitates a positive behavioral change, they indirectly **enhance their client's** understanding of the internal mental events involved in their coping mechanisms.

Without even knowing it, most Counselors/Coaches are actually promoting the essence of Self-Help. The client may feel efficacious and thus more trusting of the Counseling/Coaching process. Even the client may not be fully aware that the methods they are learning in their face-to-face sessions are helping them problem solve on their own.

When the Counselor/Coach supports Self-Help they are not only supporting their **client's natural tendency to** understand effective living but also encouraging their healthy coping skills for effective living. This leads to more tangible and positive outcomes for the fields of Counseling and Coaching.

Think of the Counselor/Coach as the control rudder and ailerons of a plane and Self-Help as the wings and body. The control surfaces guide the plane as the wings and body work to stay aloft. Clients need the guidance, but they also need to use their own expertise to live effectively in the moment, live responsibly and keep their relationships on track.

When to refer your client to Self-Help

When your client says that he/she regrets entering Counseling. Self-Help involves the "normal" concerns and problems of "normal" people. It helps clients feel like they are not alone and helps them to see how universal their concerns are. If they eventually realize that maybe their concerns are not so "normal," then they are likely to return to professional therapy.

When your client has trouble disclosing their issues to those closest to themselves. Self-Help is non-judgmental advice based on the experience of others. It allows for anonymity and makes it easier for clients to step back, reflect on their circumstances, and what they truly need.

When your client has trouble expressing themselves. Suggesting that the client read Self-Help articles can provide an objective "text" to discuss in the

Counseling/Coaching session which can "open up" the client to communicating with the therapist.

When your client is unsure about Counseling/Coaching and complains of not having self-control. When clients are contemplating Counseling/Coaching they may feel anxious or shy, perhaps even a bit self-conscious or even "weak" in seeking help. Counselors/Coaches are in the best place to help normalize their clients' discomfort by suggesting that they find articles or tapes online that speak to their concerns. This will assist the client in trusting their Counselor/Coach and being more relaxed and open with them.

When your client wants to spread out their visits. It's perfectly normal (for many reasons) for the client to want to take breaks from Counseling/Coaching or to extend the time between sessions. Assuming that this is not *contraindicated* to their treatment goals, a Self-Help referral can assist the client in more practice and further focus, self-exploration and self-knowledge. It can also give the expert the opportunity to support **their client's need of independence and self-efficacy**, which is definitely therapeutic.

When your client complains about the cost of Counseling/Coaching. A lot of Self-Help materials are available at no charge and the cost for articles, downloads and tapes are really just a fraction of the cost of Counseling/Coaching. Would you rather have a client cancel ALL visits or return periodically for guidance, and perhaps, eventually, for regular sessions?

When your client is not sure about how Counseling/Coaching ends. With only a few exceptions, clients are normally in Counseling/Coaching for less than 12 weeks (partly influenced by insurance!). **Assuming that the nature of the client's problem can improve during this time frame**, Counselors/Coaches can direct their clients to Self-Help and still be involved with them via follow-up phone calls or other low-cost modalities. Self-Help can be a way for the client and Counselor/Coach to remain in touch and have a positive relationship, even after formal treatment has ended.

When your client thinks that Counseling/Coaching is NOT helping them. If your client is expressing some doubt about their progress, you can maintain some control by suggesting a few Self-Help resources and a defined hiatus in face-to-face sessions. If the client makes progress on their own, isn't that good for the client? They may realize that their formal sessions with you helped get them to the point where they could help themselves. If they still feel that the sessions were useless after the hiatus, then they probably were not headed to a good outcome with you in any event.

If the client does not make progress, they may come back to see you with the realization that their problems are not so simple after all. Or they may seek another referral altogether, which was a likely outcome anyway.

Conclusion

Some clients may think Self-Help is a panacea. However, effective Self-Help is just one of many available problem-solving tools. Counselors/Coaches are in a key position to help their clients distinguish between effective Self-Help and worthless exploitation, to dispel the myths surrounding Self-Help, and to explain the proper role of Coaching and Counseling. The free article "[Self-Help, Coaching or Counseling: Which are right for me?](#)" explains the proper role and characteristics of each modality to consumers and clients.

Below are checklists of items that can assist you and your clients in approaching and obtaining the most appropriate level Self-Help.

Self-Help is not a(n):

- ✓ Quick fix for any but the most simple of problems
- ✓ Way to address serious or persistent problems
- ✓ Passively reading a few articles in a popular magazine
- ✓ Chatting with a friend
- ✓ Simple support group or occasional seminar
- ✓ Emotionally or impulsively driven afterthought
- ✓ Avoidance of natural consequences or negative circumstances
- ✓ Expectation to never fail or always feel good

Self-Help is a(n):

- ✓ Adjunct to professional Coaching/Counseling treatments
- ✓ Active engagement
- ✓ Opportunity to demystify the Coaching/Counseling experience
- ✓ Opportunity for client to think about their problems and potential solutions
- ✓ Method for self-improvement for general life skills
- ✓ Source for taking responsibility for ones choices/actions/changes
- ✓ Way to add more meaning and understanding to life
- ✓ Form of self-discovery and mastery
- ✓ Measure of prevention
- ✓ Form of learning coping skills
- ✓ Approach to setting and meeting specific life/lifestyle goals
- ✓ Way to live better and achieve more from life
- ✓ Way to reflect on problems and potential, realistic solutions
- ✓ Appropriate way to deal with more common "day-to-day" problems

About Arlene Unger, PhD (PSY)

Dr Unger has a busy private clinical practice located at The Center for Empowerment, Dana Point, CA, USA and has been active in online therapy for several years and the mental health profession for several decades, having held licenses/certifications as a Speech Pathologist (SP), Marriage, Family and Child Counselor (MFCC), Dance Therapist (ADTR), and currently Clinical Psychologist (PSY licensure).

Dr. Unger uses both Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT) approaches to treating children/adolescents, individual adults, couples and families. She provides both children and adults with solution focused psychological counseling for a wide spectrum of clinical disorders and/or behavioral concerns. She has extensive experience in conducting Fitness for Duty, Employee Assistance Manager Referrals, Return-To-Work, Substance Abuse evaluations, Adoption and Custody, and Gastric Bypass evaluations.

Dr. Unger enjoys blending her clinical expertise with her vast intuition and imagination. Her client feedback readily suggests improvement in physical energy, mental flexibility, emotional mobility, and serenity.

Dr. Unger, and her husband Stefan Unger, PhD, started [Real Psych Solutions](http://www.RealPsychSolutions.com) in February 2009 to provide 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.

CURRENT LICENSES/CERTIFICATIONS: PhD (PSY); EAP (Employee Assistance Professional); CD (Chemical Dependency); SAP (Substance Abuse Professional); Domestic Violence; Neuropsychological Testing; Wellness and Health Coaching; Executive Coaching; Nutrition

NOTE TO POTENTIAL AUTHORS

If you are a licensed counselor or certified wellness/lifestyle/executive coach and you have practical Self-Help materials (such as audio-visual tools, checklists, articles, manuals, workbooks, books, MP3, etc.) Real Psych Solutions (<http://www.RealPsychSolutions.com>; or support@RealPsychSolutions.com; or 949-892-5465) wants to hear from you. RPS has very simple and fair terms and you get free publicity for both free and for-sale materials!

EDITORIAL NOTE

Please contact Stefan Unger, PhD for editorial and business questions related to RealPsychSolutions.com: support@realpsychsolutions.com, or 949-892-5465