

## Clinical Practice

# "If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck ... without a license:"

## *On the Unregulated Coaching Industry*

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### Introduction

Coaching is neither a restricted nor regulated practice and there is no one agreed upon definition for coaching. For over 30 years it has been clear that there are significant similarities between coaching and psychotherapy/counseling, as both seem to overlap in the services they provide for issues, such as relationships, anxiety, depression, vocation, addiction, etc.

In recent years several state licensing boards have accused coaches of practicing psychotherapy or mental health counseling without a license. Their understandable argument was along the line of "If it walks like a duck and quack like a duck, it must be a duck, i.e., a coach practicing psychotherapy... without a license." This short article aims to introduce and define the concept and practice of coaching, reflects on the controversy between the unregulated coaching industry and *highly* regulated mental health services, and proposes a clearer differentiation between these professions and practices.

It is important to note that anyone can call themselves a coach, whether certified or not, as there are no requirements or regulations governing the industry. There is a spectrum of value offered by those in the broad field of coaching. The same could be said regarding therapists, as with any field, the quality of service will vary based on many variables, including the individual's skills, personality, and the quality of their training/education, experience, and dedication to offering the highest level of care. Thus, while difficult to acknowledge,

along with "low quality" coaches, there also are "low quality" therapists.

In 2024, there are *34,000 certified coaches* in the US (109,200 worldwide) and coaching services' market value currently exceeds \$1 billion (International Coaching Federation, 2017). One of the most quoted definitions of coaching is offered by the International Coaching Federation (2017): "Coaching is a partnership (defined as an alliance, not a legal business partnership) between the Coach and the Client in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires the client to maximize personal and professional potential. It is designed to facilitate the creation/development of personal, professional or business goals and to develop and carry out a strategy/plan for achieving those goals."

There are numerous coaching organizations and certificate programs. One of the main coaching organizations is the above mentioned International Coaching Federation (ICF). It provides training, updates on the field of coaching, guidelines and much more. However, as noted above, the coaching practice is not regulated and therefore, the ICF does not have any legal or professional authority or legitimacy to define or regulate the field.

There are numerous types of coaching services, including those focused on such areas as: Executive, Lifestyle, Transformational, Autocrat-



ic, Business, Skills, Organizational, Cognitive, Democracy, Christian Life, Parenting, Career, Performance, Holistic, Virtual, Dating, Delegative, Sales, Health, Autism, Developmental, and Salary Negotiation. Obviously, some types of coaching have a strong resemblance to mental health services that are traditionally provided by *licensed* mental health therapists, such as licensed psychologists, psychiatrists, clinical social workers, marriage and family therapists and counselors. Examples of these types of coaching include those focused on marital relationships, parenting, addiction, developmental issues, and/or family dynamics.

## Differentiating Psychotherapy from Coaching

Coaching is neither psychotherapy nor counseling; it is not supposed to be an equivalent or substitute for it. Most obviously, coaches are not supposed to diagnose or treat mental disorders, as defined by the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM, 2013). Several authors have tried shed light on some of the differences between coaching and psychotherapy (Hennes, 2024; Miles, 2022; Pines, 2021; Pokovba, 2023; Zur, 2012). The concern with this differentiation is that there are many licensed mental health professionals, the author of this article included, who are highly critical of the DSM (e.g., Greenberg, 2013; Zur, 2010). Coaches are not wedded to the DSM, neither by training nor by the need to use it as a diagnostic tool and/or for reimbursement through insurance.

In order to be clear with coaching clients, it is highly advised by ICF and the author of this article that the following statement should appear in all coaching informed consent forms, as well as on every coaching website: “Coaching is neither psychotherapy nor mental health counseling. If I (i.e., the Coach) detect a mental disorder, such as anxiety or depression, I will give you a referral for a licensed mental health professional.” It is not coaches’ responsibility to detect mental illness, and definitely not to diagnose. However; if they do suspect mental illness they should advise or recommend that the client see a licensed mental health practitioner. Such a statement is consistent with Section (E)

of “Informed Consent” offered and advised by the International Coaching Federation (2017): “Client acknowledges that coaching does not involve the diagnosis or treatment of mental disorders as defined by the American Psychiatric Association and that coaching is not to be used as a substitute for counseling, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, mental health care, substance abuse treatment, or other professional advice by legal, medical or other qualified professionals and that it is the Client’s exclusive responsibility to seek such independent professional guidance as needed. If Client is currently under the care of a mental health professional, it is recommended that the Client promptly inform the mental health care provider of the nature and extent of the coaching relationship agreed upon by the Client and the Coach.” A sample of a full Coaching Contract is also available at the Coaching Federation website at <https://coaching-federation.org/app/uploads/2017/11/Sample-CoachingAgreement.pdf>

## 2024 – Potential Upcoming Coaching Crisis

In 2024, several articles were published in general audience newspapers on the complexities of defining unregulated coaching services and the differentiation from highly regulated psychotherapy and counseling services. For example, the *New York Times* published an article in June of 2024 with the following heading: “They Spent Their Life Savings on Life Coaching: Some people who wanted to improve their lives and careers through coaching found themselves trapped in what they described as a pyramid scheme.” The heart of the piece zeroes in on the fact that coaching is an unregulated and unlicensed practice with no checks and balances for the coach’s techniques, conduct, standard of care, and advice. *ProPublica*, a Utah publication, published the following article, also in June 2024, entitled: “When Therapists Lose Their Licenses, Some Turn to the Unregulated Life Coaching Industry Instead: Despite past misconduct, some former therapists have continued their careers as life coaches. Now, after a high-profile conviction in Utah, legislators are asking whether it’s time for more oversight.” Similar to the *New York Times* article, *ProPublica*

illuminates the lack of regulated oversight, and the risks associated with such lack of oversight and accountability. These risks may include being guided by an untrained, uneducated, uninformed or inexperienced coach, or even an exploitative coach or a coach who is unequipped to recognize the signs of major mental illness.

In 2023 and 2024, in my role as a forensic psychologist expert, I became aware of several licensing boards in the US that have accused coaches of practicing psychotherapy, counseling, or social work without a license. It seems that the assertion of “If it walks like a duck and quack like a duck, it must be a duck, i.e., a coach practicing psychotherapy... without a license” has started to resonate with some licensing boards. The main concern is clearly that coaching can sometimes look like psychotherapy/counseling, even though it requires neither formal graduate education nor state licensing. One of the main concerns is consumers/clients are not aware of the differences between licensed mental health care practitioners and coaches. As noted above, there is no guarantee that professional, ethical, and legal standards of care will be followed by coaches, and there is no disciplinary process for incompetent, inept, or exploitative coaching practices.

In summary, while the unregulated coaching industry does open up wide opportunities for growth and healing, it also presents a risk to clients, due to the lack of operating within an established and regulated standard of care. While licensing does not necessarily ensure an effective or ethical therapeutic experience, it does ensure (1) board-established standards of care; (2) therapists’ successful completion of graduate education requirements; and (3) checks and balances that are in place, in the event that a therapist/counselor does radically deviate outside of acceptable/regulated terms of treatment.

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