

PROFESSIONAL LIFE COACHING

COACHING VS. COUNSELING

Understanding the Difference



LIGHT UNIVERSITY

Coaching vs. Counseling



Many people feel drawn to helping work because they care deeply about others and want to support growth, healing, and meaningful change. Coaching and counseling can both play an important role in that calling, but they are not the same thing.

Understanding the difference matters. It helps people get the right kind of support. It protects clients from confusion or harm. And it gives clarity to those exploring coaching, adding coaching to an existing counseling practice, or discerning a career transition.

This guide explains what counseling is, what coaching is, how they differ, and why staying in the right lane ultimately serves everyone better.



Disclaimer: This guide is for educational purposes and does not provide medical, mental health, or legal advice. Laws and scope-of-practice rules vary by state and credential. Professionals should follow their licensing board and ethical code.

Understanding the Difference

What Counseling Is

Counseling is mental health care provided by licensed professionals such as counselors, therapists, and psychologists. These professionals are trained and licensed (or otherwise credentialed, depending on role and state) to assess and treat mental health concerns — and, where permitted, to diagnose.

Counseling is designed to help people who are struggling with challenges that interfere with daily life, including anxiety, depression, trauma, grief, or harmful patterns of behavior.

It often involves understanding what's beneath the surface and addressing issues that make it difficult to function, cope, or feel safe and grounded.

In short: counseling helps people heal and regain stability when emotional or mental health concerns are getting in the way of living well.

What Coaching Is

Coaching is a non-clinical, goal-focused partnership that helps people move forward with clarity and intention. Coaches do not diagnose or treat mental health conditions.

Instead, coaching assumes the person is capable, resourceful, and ready to take action, even if they don't yet have all the answers.

Coaching is especially helpful for people who are functioning well but feel stuck, uncertain, or in need of direction and accountability. It focuses on the present and future, helping individuals clarify goals, make decisions, and follow through on meaningful next steps.

In short: coaching helps capable people turn insight into action and make progress on purpose.

Knowing Where the Line Is

Healthy helping requires knowing when coaching is appropriate — and when it is not. Referring as a coach does not mean failure. It's an act of professionalism and genuine care for the person you're serving.

Coaching is usually appropriate when:

- A person is emotionally stable enough to take consistent action
- The work is focused on goals, decisions, or next steps
- The person can self-regulate and follow through most weeks

Coaching should pause and refer when:

- Mental health symptoms are severe, persistent, or worsening
- Daily functioning is impaired (work, sleep, basic routines)
- The issue requires diagnosis, treatment, or clinical care
- The concern is beyond the coach's training or scope

COUNSELING

- ✓ "I'm not functioning like I normally do."
- ✓ "My anxiety or depression is taking over."
- ✓ "I'm dealing with trauma, compulsive behaviors, or intrusive thoughts."

COACHING

- ✓ "I'm stable, but I feel stuck and unsure of what's next."
- ✓ "I need clarity and accountability."
- ✓ "I'm ready to make changes and want help following through."

For Counselors Who Want to Add Coaching

Counselors are often drawn to coaching because it offers a different way to serve people who are stable and ready to move forward.

However, coaching requires a distinct mindset, role, and skill set, and it does not automatically transfer from counseling. Being a skilled counselor does not, by itself, make someone an effective coach. Coaching works differently and requires intentional training in coaching models, ethics, and practice.

When counselors add coaching, it must be offered as a separate service, not blended into counseling work or switched back and forth within the same relationship.

Coaching works best when:

- **Professional coaching training** has been completed to develop the proper posture, skills, and boundaries
- The service is clearly defined and explained to clients from the start
- The role being used is explicit (“coach” or “counselor,” not both)
- The boundaries between clinical care and coaching are consistently respected

As a best practice, counselors should not shift an existing counseling client into a coaching relationship with themselves. If coaching is appropriate, the client should be referred to another qualified coach.

Likewise, if a counselor is working with someone as a coach and mental health concerns arise that require diagnosis or treatment, coaching should pause and the individual should be referred to another licensed mental health professional.

Licensed professionals must also remain mindful of state licensure boundaries. Even when services are labeled as coaching, providing mental health treatment across state lines without proper authorization may violate licensure regulations.