



Untangling Threads: Navigating the Intersection of Life Coaching and Psychotherapy.

In the ever-evolving landscape of personal development, one phenomenon has seized the spotlight—life coaching. Life coaches play a multifaceted role, offering guidance, support, and strategies to help individuals achieve their goals and overcome challenges. It's crucial to understand, however, that while life coaches are skilled in facilitating positive change, they cannot not provide psychotherapy services.

If you're planning a career as a life coach, it's crucial to distinguish between life coaching and psychotherapy so that you don't overstep into a regulated field. To be fair, it's not an easy distinction to make. The International Coaching Federation (ICF) defines coaching as, "partnering with Clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential."¹ Whereas the American Psychiatric Association states psychotherapy is intended to help a person "function better and have enhanced emotional well-being and healing."²

One key distinction is that California does not mandate specific licensing or certification for life coaches, however counseling and therapy is regulated to ensure the safety, ethical conduct, and competency of practitioners. That is not to say that life coaches shouldn't seek some form of certification to better prepare themselves to serve their clients and protect themselves from liability.

¹ International Coaching Federation. "ICF Code of Ethics." Coachingfederation.org, 2023, <https://coachingfederation.org/ethics/code-of-ethics>

² Psychiatry. "Psychiatry.org - What is Psychotherapy?." Psychiatry, n.d., <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/psychot-herapy>.

So what services can and cannot be provided by a life coach? The law tells us that no person without the proper licensure may engage in the following: Psychology (CA BPC § 2903), Marriage and Family Therapy (CA BPC § 4980.02), Professional Clinical Counseling (CA BPC § 4999.20), Clinical Social Work (CA BPC § 4989.14), and Educational Psychology (CA BPC § 4989.14). There is considerable overlap between these regulated areas and coaching. For example, Psychotherapy is described as "the use of psychological methods in a professional relationship to assist a person or persons to acquire greater human effectiveness or to modify feelings, conditions, attitudes, and behaviors that are emotionally, intellectually, or socially ineffectual or maladaptive." CA BPC § 2903 (c). But don't we somewhat engage in this practice in simply being a supportive friend to another person? Yes, but let's put this into context. The key here is that if you're not licensed as a psychologist don't represent yourself as such and don't use principles of psychology to assess, diagnose, prevent, treat, or intervene with another. *Id.*, § 2903(b).

In another example, a Professional Clinical Counselor focuses "exclusively on the application of counseling interventions and psychotherapeutic techniques for the purposes of improving mental health, and is not intended to capture other, nonclinical forms of counseling for the purposes of licensure." BPC § 4999.20. If this sounds broad, it's because it is, especially since psychotherapy techniques means "the application of cognitive, affective, verbal or nonverbal, systemic or holistic counseling strategies that include principles of development, wellness, and maladjustment that reflect a pluralistic society." *Id.* And the other

statutes related to the other regulated fields are not much different.

So where does this leave us? And what can I suggest to a life coach who is concerned about accidentally dabbling in psychotherapy?³ A few suggestions. **First**, refrain from labeling your services as psychotherapeutic or implying that your coaching program includes psychotherapy. Make sure this distinction is explicitly outlined in your client agreement and provide the necessary disclosures to eliminate any potential confusion.

Second, aside from refraining from labeling your work as psychotherapy, avoid actively engaging in psychotherapeutic practices. This entails abstaining from making diagnoses or devising treatment plans in the course of your coaching activities.

Third, make sure that if you identify any risks requiring psychotherapy, you promptly refer your clients to their licensed psychotherapist or physician. Additionally, consider including a provision in your client agreement that states, in emergency situations jeopardizing people or property, you reserve the discretion to dial 9-1-1 or contact relevant government agencies. This helps set clear expectations and ensures the safety and well-being of all parties involved.

Fourth, consider building connections with licensed psychotherapists and fellow coaches to foster collaborative idea-sharing. This not only strengthens your capacity to identify potential red flag situations but also contributes to the advancement of your life coaching business and overall professional competence. The exchange of insights and experiences within a network can be invaluable for continuous improvement and

staying well-informed within the dynamic field of life coaching

Four, ensure that you inform your client as to confidentiality issues and get the necessary consent to disclose certain information if necessary. Remember that life coaching is not regulated so you're not bound by the same confidentiality rules as psychotherapists, but if there is a reasonable expectation of privacy, make sure you don't violate this expectation.

Five, maintain comprehensive documentation of your clients, encompassing essential details like their address, phone number, email, and emergency contacts. Additionally, thorough documentation of your coaching sessions, capturing key insights and any guidance provided to your clients during these sessions. This comprehensive record-keeping not only helps you stay organized but also fosters transparency and accountability in your coaching practice.

Sixth, contemplate establishing a Limited Liability Company (LLC) to safeguard yourself from liability. Regardless of whether you opt for an LLC or operate as a sole proprietorship, it's crucial to secure adequate liability insurance. Nowadays, there are insurance carriers tailored for life coaching, but existing liability insurance in related fields may suffice, provided the carrier acknowledges that you are offering life coaching services and you possess ample coverage. This

dual approach ensures a protective legal structure and financial coverage for your coaching practice.

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³ For simplicity's sake I will refer to all regulated fields hereinafter collectively as "psychotherapy".