

A Life Coach Is not a Therapist, But Here's What We Do

Think of us like an action-oriented mentor who can help you reach your goals.



We all need a little help sometimes, especially when it comes to journeys of self-discovery. Whether your goal is to be more confident or to find fulfillment in a passion project, it can be pretty tough to figure out how to get from point A (identifying a goal) to point B (actually going after and achieving that goal). That's where a life coach comes in. Like a therapist, a life coach is someone who can help you identify strengths and weaknesses and overcome obstacles holding you back. But who you should see depends on your issues and what you're hoping to achieve. So, here is what you need to know before you reach out.



What Does a Life Coach do?

Well, you know what a sports coach does: They help an individual or team identify a goal (i.e. winning) and then they develop a plan for that person or group. It is pretty straightforward—and the same holds true for life coaching.

“Life coaching focuses on what's happening right now, what a person wants next, and how that gap can be bridged,” explains certified coach Jane Scudder and founder of leadership development firm The New Exec.

Coaching is about helping people to identify the obstacles that keep getting in their way, assisting them with finding motivation, and pinpointing any resistance to change. A life coach is a broad term. You can also find business coaches, executive coaches, leadership coaches,

and health coaches, but a life coach is typically most helpful when you are thinking about your overall future.

“My work is really centered on four things,” says Scudder. “Helping someone expand an idea; helping someone understand what their present experience is with mindfulness, exploring mindsets to help someone ‘see’ options differently, and helping someone understand personal value and belief systems, and how these show up in all areas of our lives.”

It is not a life coach's role to provide advice.

A common misconception is that life coaches provide advice, says Kate Bathras, a Certified Professional Coach and member of the ICF. “It’s not a coach’s role to impart wisdom, but rather to facilitate the client’s own process of connecting to their inner wisdom, and making choices about their actions and next steps from that place of connection,” she explains. In that sense, a coach is an unbiased brainstorming partner—you are still the one doing the heavy lifting.

And how is a Life Coach different from a therapist?

Coaching can be therapeutic, but there are some major differences between life coaching and therapy. “A coach looks at your present to help you create the future you desire, while a therapist looks at your past to help you manage your present,” explains Tess Brigham, a licensed psychotherapist and board-certified coach (BCC). “**So, while coaching is action-oriented, therapy is insight-oriented.**”

A session with a life coach will feel a lot different than one with a therapist—one provides structure and accountability while the other is more open-ended. “My coaching sessions are very directive—clients complete questionnaires to identify goals and always have homework to accomplish between sessions so I’m learning what they have or haven’t done since our last session,” says Brigham. “In therapy sessions, I let my clients decide which direction they would like to go in, and our conversation is usually determined by how they’re feeling in that moment, any insights they gained since we last met, and what people or events may have triggered their feelings.”

Life coaching sessions tend to be more direct.

You are also not going to go to a life coach and get a diagnosis. “A licensed therapist is someone who has been trained, gained clinical hours that were supervised by professionals, and have been vetted by a board,” says Angela Kenzslowe, a clinical psychologist. “They diagnose disorders, have the skills and tools to work with traumas, and work with short-term behavioral modifications.”

That is not to say life coaches do not have tools and skills for specific aspects of life—but there is no healing work, she adds. “The challenge is that there are no regulations or standard of care for life coaches. Anyone can hang a shingle and call themselves a coach,” she says. “That doesn’t mean that life coaching can’t be effective; it just means that a person must do their due diligence in vetting a life coach.” Look for ones who have received training through a certifying body such as the ICF or BCC.

Okay, so which one is right for you?

Actually, you don’t have to choose—it’s totally fine to see both. “A good rule of thumb is that if your issues are disrupting your personal or professional life, you should consider working with a therapist,” says Jacinta Jimenez, a psychologist and board-certified coach (although you don’t necessarily have to be going through a huge life event to benefit from therapy).

But “many people seek coaching after or alongside therapy, as it builds upon the healing that can take place in the therapy process,” adds Bathras.

The important thing to keep in mind is that the two should not overlap, and a life coach would not address clinical issues. “A great life coach will know the boundaries of coaching and will refer you to a therapist if and when clinical work is needed,” says Kenzslowe.