

WHAT TYPE OF HELP IS RIGHT FOR ME?

by

Gladeana McMahon

I am often asked what the difference is between coaching, counselling and psychotherapy and which type of help is best for what type of problem. Having spent most of my life with individuals in either a therapeutic or coaching capacity, I know only too well how important it is to get the right help at the right time.

For the average person it can all seem like a bit of a minefield – coaching, counselling, cognitive-behaviour therapy, psychology, psychotherapy and psychiatry – how are you supposed to know? I have come across people in counselling who were obviously coaching clients and also those who had signed up for coaching but whose emotional baggage meant that counselling was the only really useful option.

Let's look at the type of people involved in the various forms of helping, what they can and cannot do and how coaching, counselling and psychotherapy can help.

So what's in a name?

Psychiatrist – you can become a psychiatrist only if you are a medical doctor who has undertaken further specialist training in psychiatry.

Psychiatry is concerned with the diagnosis and drug-treatment of mental illness. What often surprises many people is the fact that a psychiatrist is not a therapist and *does not* have to undertake any training in psychological therapies. A psychiatrist needs to satisfy him or herself of the type of mental illness a person is experiencing and may, after the initial assessment, refer the person on to a therapeutic practitioner such as a clinical psychologist or counsellor.

A number of psychiatrists do undertake additional training in one of the psychological therapies but do so as a matter of personal choice. You cannot assume that all psychiatrists have such training. The Royal College of Psychiatrists is the professional body for psychiatrists in the UK.

Psychologist – is normally used to describe an individual who has obtained an academic psychology degree. A Psychology degree does not equip an individual with the practical skills to help people. Once an individual has obtained his or her degree the next step is to choose a vocationally based qualification such as counselling. This is why you will hear terms such as clinical psychologist, educational psychologist and counselling psychologist as each term acknowledges that the person concerned has undertaken further specialist training in a given area. The specialist body for psychologists is the British Psychological Society.

Counsellor – is the name given to a person who practises one or more of many different types of therapeutic intervention. Counselling training can vary from a basic two-year part-time diploma up to higher level degrees. Many counsellors build on basic diploma level qualifications with advanced certificates such as MAs. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy is the main professional body for counselling and psychotherapy in the UK.

Psychotherapist – is the usual term to describe a person whose training has equipped the individual to work with deep-seated emotional difficulties. In many instances you will find that a psychotherapist may also be a counsellor as it is not uncommon to train in counselling first and

then to move on to more advanced forms of psychotherapy training.

There are a number of bodies that represent psychotherapy in the UK, the two lead bodies being the BACP and the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP).

Coach – a coach is a person who seeks to assist an individual set and achieve their own personal goals. A coach may use one of a number of names to denote the type of coaching offered such as Life or Executive Coach. There are currently three major general bodies for coaching: The Association for Coaching, the International Coaching Federation and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council.

The different types of help

Counselling

Counselling is focused on helping people with emotional distress which stops them from being able to function as well as they would like.

Counselling timeframes can be as short as 6 sessions or less or as long as 3 years or more once a week. Counselling is more concerned with getting people who are functioning below normal back to a normal level. The types of problems that are suitable for counselling are bereavement,

relationship difficulties, parenting problems, work-related issues such as bullying, stress, a general unhappiness with life and family challenges.

There are many different types of counselling models to choose from.

One psychologist recorded 450 different types of therapy so you would be excused if you found the whole area confusing as many counsellors do too.

However, most therapies fit one of three main types:

- The Psychodynamic, which attempts to make conscious the unconscious motivations and their origins which drive us all and through such understanding enable beneficial change to take place. This approach does not aim to teach strategies or techniques to clients.
- The Humanistic, which sees individuals as unique and focuses on creating a therapeutic climate where the individual can get in touch with his or her own specialness and by doing so the unwanted aspects of behaviour will change.

- The Cognitive-Behavioural, where the emphasis is on using skills and strategies to change self-defeating thinking and behaviours.

Cognitive-Behavioural therapies are likely to be short-term and focused whereas psychodynamic and humanistic are more likely to be longer-term.

There is a shortage of Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT) in the UK even though the National Institute of Clinical Evidence (NICE), the body that advises the NHS on the best treatments, has listed CBT as either the only or one of the treatments of choice for a variety of psychological conditions.

Psychotherapy relates to therapeutic interventions that are geared towards people whose personality is damaged in some way. Perhaps the person has been given a label such as “personality disorder”, which is a way of describing the variety of ways an individual may not be able to function. For example, Dependent Personality Disorder would be where a person is unable to function independently and is always looking to another person to look after them even if it means staying in a highly destructive relationship. Alternatively, a person may develop a condition such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder where she cannot leave the house

or continue to work because the fear of contamination is so great leading the person to wash their hands obsessively many times even to the extent of making them bleed from washing. This would not be considered a personality disorder but would be considered a condition serious enough to need more specialist help. Psychotherapy is usually long-term of up to 4 or 5 years and if the psychotherapist is of an analytical persuasion visits may be twice instead of once a week during this time.

As with Counselling there are many differing types of psychotherapy and it is important to choose the right kind. Many psychotherapists think that the particular approach they have trained in is the only valid approach and this can make it difficult for the individual to make an objective assessment.

Coaching

Coaching is aimed at people who have the desire and the ability to use a personal and/or professional development tool. Coaching is skill-based and forward-looking and is usually short-term for, say, between 6 and 12 sessions. However, the length of sessions can vary from 60 to 90 minutes.

Some people may see a coach weekly or have one or two meetings weekly and then move on to fortnightly or monthly depending on circumstances.

Coaching is about using strategies to get the best from life and a coach helps you set goals and consider what you have to do to achieve these. One way of looking at it is to imagine that coaching takes someone from a zero position and moves him or her to a plus position. Coaching is not meant for people in emotional distress. One way of thinking about this is to imagine two people facing the same situation – one may feel nervous but is able to use strategies to change matters. The second person's anxiety is so great he or she is unable to think rationally about the situation and finds it impossible to use the strategies that will help. The first person is a typical coaching client whereas the second is a counselling client.

No amount of coaching will sort out emotional baggage that requires counselling. If you go to see a coach when you need to see a counsellor then expect your coach to refer you on to a counsellor after he or she has explained why coaching is unlikely to help you. However, coaching can often help people who have completed counselling to move to the next level.

What's the best type of help?

Finding the best type of help can be a problem. Cognitive-behaviour therapy is the only therapy with an impressive database of studies to demonstrate its effectiveness. There are some studies showing that ordinary supportive counselling can also be of help. In addition, there are some studies that support the idea that it is not the approach so much as the therapist and whether you have a good relationship with them that is more likely to dictate whether you will improve

How to chose?

At the end of the day you need to decide whether you have the ability, desire and motivation to use a skill-based approach like coaching. If you have emotional problems that get in the way then counselling is likely to be of more help. If you are not sure then book an assessment with a practitioner who can help you decide what would be best for you.

I would like to say 'ask your doctor'. However, whilst 51% of GP practices have a counsellor attached to them many doctors can be ignorant about what counselling is, how it works and the types on offer.

Having said that, there are also some really clued-up GPs and so it really depends into which category your doctor falls.

I believe it is good practice to ask every practitioner (whether coach, counsellor or psychotherapist) what his or her assessment is of your circumstances and how he or she will work with you. If it does not make sense then find another person but remember you do not have to like what is being said for it to be right. Ask for your work to be reviewed on a regular basis – most practitioners will offer this option without being asked as this gives both of you the opportunity to check on progress. Also, make sure your practitioner is registered with a professional body and abides by a code of ethics.

Gladeana McMahon

www.gladeanamcmahon.com

Listed as one of the UK's Top Coaches by the *Independent on Sunday*.

Author of a range of self help books and TV Coach/Therapist.