



Is Trauma Coaching Like Therapy?

A common question about Trauma Recovery Coaching is how it differs from therapy. There are some key differences that I will attempt to outline for you here. There is also much overlap in the two services.

Not all psychotherapy looks or feels the same. Many therapists are trained to cope with serious or life-threatening situations as well as daily struggles that we all encounter. These might include navigating a career change, improving relationship skills, or coping with stress.

Psychotherapists tend to take a leading role in helping clients address their problems. They function to direct treatment, offer suggestions, give advice, and/or assign specific types of homework. The therapist typically designs a treatment plan, including recovery goals for the client based on their professional opinion and knowledge of your history, environment, and needs. The relationship is usually one of warmth; however, the relationship is foremost a professional one characterized by ethics and boundaries. Your psychotherapist would very rarely discuss anything personal about themselves with a client.

Therapists might “process” past traumas with clients using various modalities such as EMDR or experiential therapy and psychodrama, which focus heavily on revisiting past trauma and examining it closely. They might also address trauma by referring the client to specialized medical-based services such as ECT, medication-based treatment, or TMS.

Therapists have the skills necessary to help when a client’s mental health is unstable and requires diagnosis, assessment, and treatment. They direct their client’s care and provide intervention when clients are unable to help themselves. Therapists also have expertise dealing with serious issues, such as addiction, eating disorders, and active suicidal ideation. Many trauma coaches do have additional skills and training, myself included, to help them address more serious issues such as those noted. I also have specialized training in creativity coaching and recovery from narcissistic/emotional abuse and emotional literacy.

Most trauma coaches often have a more limited scope of competence than therapists do, unless they have undergone more specialized training. We create a relationship dynamic that is unique to trauma coaching. I call this “the sacred space.” Coaches cannot advise you on medication or medically based treatment modalities. Coaches do not diagnose. However, they do have knowledge about the various diagnoses and “symptoms” as well as a general knowledge of categories of psychotropic medications. We use this knowledge to integrate the more clinical aspect of your emotional health into our supporting role in your life and recovery.

The trauma recovery coach assists clients in coping with issues occurring in their lives NOW and helps them form healthy plans for their future. They do not revisit past trauma unless it helps us understand the “birth of a belief or behavior,” which often offers insight into the deeply personalized needs of each client. Of course, if the client wants to dig deep into the details of their trauma, we support that wish and hold space for them to do so.

Also, Trauma Recovery Coaching is a client-led modality. We make suggestions, educate, and offer guidance, but we are never in charge of leading clients to healing. The best coaches ask appropriate questions that prompt the client to think about important aspects of their healing. Often, the client reaches their own conclusions through the exploration of the answers to these unique questions. Trauma recovery coaches do not create and write treatments plan; they build relationships based heavily on trust so that clients can gain the confidence to

design their own treatment plan with support from their coach. Coaches do not set goals for clients. When ready, clients set their own goals and work at their own pace. (*) Coaches do not focus on “tracking the progress” toward meeting goals. In fact, it might take the client weeks to make progress on step one. Coaches do not question any lack of progress—because we work in a space that is led by client needs and decisions. Instead, the coach “checks in” on occasion to inquire about the goals and offer support. They often assist clients in breaking a challenging goal into bite-size pieces.

The relationship between trauma coach and client is also one of warmth, respect, and high personal regard; in addition, the relationship (like the therapist relationship) is also professional, guided by ethics and boundaries. (*) Trauma coaching is client-focused and client-led. The power of the coaching process is the relationship between coach and client. **Relationship** is everything, and coaches create and maintain a loving and safe space in which they remain fully present and judgment free with the client. Coaching is also intra-developmental; just as clients learn from coaches, those coaches also learn from their clients. It is a symbiotic connection in that way. When appropriate and relevant, a coach might share a small excerpt of their own healing journey, to normalize the client’s life experience, validate their struggle, and form a deeper connection.

What coaches do:

- Coaches are guides, teachers, and mentors. They come alongside their clients as peers, not authority figures. Coaches share power equally with their clients.
- Coaches always view the process, the individual, and the situation through a trauma lens. We are mandated to offer trauma-informed care. (*)
- Coaches build healthy relationships with clients so that they can learn how to build healthy relationships with themselves, others, and the world.
- Coaches support clients with their goal-setting efforts, helping them map out a path that brings them closer to leading the lives that they want to live.
- Coaches provide education about trauma and recovery. We aim to empower clients with a deeper understanding of how trauma impacts their lives and to introduce them to various modalities that may help them take charge of their own healing.
- Coaches support their clients in identifying the primary lies/core beliefs they learned from their abuser or enabler. Once identified, they help their clients define new healthy truths/beliefs. We do inner critic work together.
- Coaches celebrate progress with their clients!
- Coaches work with clients to help them develop a healthy view of themselves, others, and the world.

What Coaches do NOT do

- Coaches do not treat, diagnose, or assess their client’s mental health.
- Coaches do not prescribe medication or give advice about any medications.
- Coaches do not prescribe treatment.
- Coaches do not design treatment plans or set goals FOR clients.
- Coaches do not usually “process” trauma with their clients. Their focus is upon helping clients function at a higher level and in a more positive space in their everyday lives.
- Coaches do not work with clients who are at high risk of harming themselves or others. They bring in additional specialized support or refer the client to appropriate help until they are stable enough to return to the coaching environment.
- Coaches do not work outside of their scope of competence (areas of skill and training).

Adapted from “The Difference Between Coaching and Therapy” published by the IAOTRC and written by Bobbi Parish, MA, CTCR-S (Executive Director)

Other sources:

“What Really Happens in a Therapy Session?” by Suzanne Gelb, Ph.D., J.D.

“The Different Treatment Modalities for Healing Trauma” (choicehousecolorado.com)