

Lying on the 'couch'

where coaching and counselling meet

Is it possible to bring emotional depth into the goal-oriented, solution-focused coaching relationship? Dual trained therapist **Sue Houghton** examines some of the commonly-held beliefs about coaching and counselling and, in exploring the intersection between the two, introduces a new concept - 'couching'.



embarked on my life coach training in 2008. Already an experienced counsellor, I found it refreshing to learn about a dynamic, change-orientated model. While there were pitfalls for the therapist/coach, I found the experience generally to be positive; I felt I gained tools and strategies that I could use for the benefit of my clients.

However, there was a downside. For, in spite of that excitement, I found myself disturbed by the experience of being coached. Over the five-month training, I was coached many times: sometimes by peers (ie novice coaches), sometimes by experienced coaches. On occasion, I felt pressured to make decisions prematurely, which left me feeling emotionally dishevelled. Later I drew an analogy with train journeys and likened the experience to having travelled on the high speed Intercity 125. I might have reached my destination but I had no idea of the territory I had passed through or how I'd got there. Worse still, with inadequate time to reflect and consider my choices, I may even have ended up somewhere I didn't want to be. I felt doubt, questioning my own competence and understanding of the model. Perhaps I was over-sensitive and wanted more emotional content than others? Perhaps I wanted it to feel more like a counselling session?

These are the questions I asked myself. However, my experience was reflected in the feedback I received from others. During my training I completed many coaching sessions in a

voluntary capacity in order to gain my practice hours. Many times the issues that people brought to the coaching sessions demanded more than a mere focus on solutions. Clients reported feeling blocked, often did not understand those blocks and certainly didn't feel equipped to change them. They didn't necessarily require or desire counselling and they found coaching useful but they wanted more emotional content.

Fast forward four years and, in the process of writing my own book, I was invited to teach on a coaching course. Working with trainee coaches reinforced my own experience. They too often described feeling 'ridden roughshod over' in the attempt to nail a goal - most coaching models consider achieving this within the early part of the session essential to the coaching process. My student coaches reported that they wanted more depth and yet their over-riding concern was that they ought not to stray into what they saw as 'counselling territory'. I understood their concern. The training that coaches and counsellors undertake is vastly different. My coach training touched on psychological theories, skimmed the surface of transference and projection but was more focused on simple motivation techniques. Would I, without the benefit of four years' training and much self-development work, enter the realm of someone else's emotions? No! And rightly so; in fact to do so would be highly unethical. That said, working without feelings would produce a dry

product indeed, and this is a valid criticism of standard coaching - that it seems to suggest that one size can fit all in the application of a simple model, in this case TGROW (which stands for Topic, Goal, Reality, Options and When/Will). I think for me, as a therapist, process will always be the priority. Working with emotion is a way of harnessing that energy, in order to move forward towards the client's identified goal. To me emotion represents a rich seam of creativity and frequently the place within us where real lasting change happens. Change takes time, commitment and perseverance; most dual-trained therapists will acknowledge the reality of this in their work. These practitioners, through extensive training, possess psychological awareness (also of their own process) and thus credibility.

Couching is born

While I was teaching, my students and I began discussing the differences between coaching and counselling, and I hit on the term *couching*. Rolling the word around my mouth, I felt a deep resonance within me; it felt right. The students loved it. Initially I saw the term as a tongue-in-cheek, a light-hearted take on a serious subject, but it has since gathered momentum and become a discipline in its own right. It encapsulates exactly the intersection between coaching and counselling we were talking about. The word 'intersection' is defined in the Collins English Dictionary as 'to divide, to cross or lying

across'. The word 'couching' has two other meanings. It describes an early form of eye surgery to clear cataracts, leading to greater clarity of vision. And it is an embroidery term to describe how threads are added to an existing piece of fabric. Both seemed to describe in wonderful metaphor what happens in the process of working with my clients: a process giving insight, making change possible, and strengthening what an individual already has. How apposite! Then, as now, I felt that coaching had much to offer. But the simple coaching model was insufficient; it lacked emotional depth. I see the creation of couching as a synergy. Let us be clear, this is not a compromise; nothing is lost, there is only gain. In couching, I built my foundations from counselling ethics and protocols, including the importance of boundaries, core conditions, the centrality of supervision and the need for ongoing personal and professional development. My tools were those from the coaching box that I had found of benefit to my clients.

Compared with therapy, coaching is still in its infancy, certainly in the recognition of its usefulness in so many provinces. The difficulty I see for the coaching world is that, as a relatively

new discipline, it is still trying to shrug off some of the perceptions that persist in the public mind. Definitions of coaching vary enormously. Common perceptions about the differences between coaching and counselling include the following.

Coaching is traditionally seen as present and future focused, whereas counselling is seen as engaging with the past.¹

Coaching might be seen as present/future focused, but in reality many of the blocks people bring to a session are caused by past events and experiences in their lives. While change happens in the now, many clients seek to understand how past experiences are affecting their lives today.

Coaching is viewed as suitable only for highly functioning individuals, whereas counselling is more suited to dysfunction.²

The idea that only the psychologically sound, 'non-clinical' clients access coaching is just not true. Latest figures suggest 25-50 per cent of people who seek coaching meet clinical mental health criteria.³ And, while coaching is still considered suitable for those without serious mental health problems and for people who are considered resourceful, the reality is that coaching is seen as more acceptable by the general public, and therefore may attract others outside this remit.

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Coaching is geared towards performance, counselling to healing and trauma recovery.⁴ Coaching is for business, counselling for healing.

Commonly held beliefs such as these are outdated. Many forms of time-limited therapy now exist, and many of them are solution-focused. Coaching has the potential to address many emotional issues, particularly if we are working at emotional depth, as we are in coaching.

Therapy is seen as a two-way relationship, whereas coaching is frequently three-way, with confidentiality at times being compromised.⁵

The perception of the three-way relationship is often erroneous. Many coaching relationships are purely one-on-one. Increasingly, coaching is sought outside the workplace to address a wide range of issues. It is also true that counselling may take place in less than ideal circumstances. I myself have experienced working in the NHS and being provided with both clinical and managerial supervision by my immediate line manager; unfortunately my manager could see no boundary issue. Part of my current counselling work is via an employee assistance programme (EAP) provider. This can present similar issues. I am asked on occasion to submit a report to the employer following the end of therapy. Where possible, these are completed with my client's consent and input. My point here is that in counselling too there can be a three-way relationship, leading to confidentiality being compromised in a way that does not always sit comfortably with the majority of counsellors, all of whom work to the highest ethical standards.

Therapy is protracted, coaching time-limited.⁶

Much of the therapy in the UK is provided within IAPT (the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies programme) and through EAPs. Both of these services typically offer six sessions, with little flexibility due to tight budgets and short time-lines. Being a coach in private practice has given me the opportunity to work with clients over a more extended period, and to work more flexibly with people than counselling alone allows.

Coaching and counselling

Ten years ago some of the above perceptions may have been closer to the truth. The origin of coaching in sports and business environments has created the perception that coaching is always and exclusively about performance. I would argue that, even within these arenas, it is the whole person who turns up for coaching – an embodied, emotional, functioning whole, not just their higher-level, cognitive parts. Some people are better than others at sectioning off parts of themselves and their lives but this is by no means always the case. People are complex and dual-trained therapists will already be aware that interactions with others are frequently tainted with transference from the past. Sifting these out and gaining insight into interpersonal dynamics is a wonderful way of empowering people to cope better generally, and particularly in addressing workplace issues.

The intersection of coaching and counselling rests on the concept of coaching psychology and the distinction between coaches with a psychological training and those without. The criticism frequently levelled at standard coaching practice (ie as practised by those with no psychological training) is that it takes a one-size-fits-all approach. This certainly reflects my own experience. It is the difference between a commercial enterprise and a profession, which counselling is already. It disturbs me that coaches, unless they have undertaken other training, are unlikely to fully understand the psychology of human change in all its complexities. Those with psychological training are going to use that understanding and base their coaching interventions on sound theoretical concepts and evidence. Those without such training risk doing harm to individuals and, with no regulatory body, there is little recourse for a client who suffers in this way. How many coaches complete a full assessment of their client, as they might in a counselling session? Most therapists are familiar with the challenges and pitfalls of inappropriate referrals.

Coaching then is a coaching model, in that it remains goal-focused, although not to the exclusion of the process of change. Coaching generally does not aim to be therapeutic. 'Therapeutic' is defined as that which has a good

effect on the body and/or mind. But a coaching process with emotional depth, or coaching, is frequently experienced as exactly that. With applications broad and diverse, coaching can be considered a valid talking therapy. It equals therapeutic coaching, with emotional and psychological depth. It focuses on concrete changes in an individual's life, and here I emphasise the real life that they are living. The better I understand the reality of the social systems in which my client lives, the more I understand the practical realities of their life and can help them during the coaching process through, for example, promoting growth and helping them overcome inhibitions, address erroneous outdated belief systems or live a more satisfying life. A lot of problem solving may go on in a coaching session, freeing up the person to make their own decisions and find solutions.

Coaching is flexible in application. I might be working on promoting growth or self-awareness, making career changes, or addressing work/life balance, among other things. Certain models of counselling, especially those rooted in the psychoanalytic tradition, may focus almost exclusively on the past. In coaching we know we are working with now, because change will happen in the now, not in the past. It is pertinent and relevant to ask about the past: it assists a person in overcoming the blocks that stop them achieving their goals in life. Coaching offers a collaborative, tailored approach that is systematic and fosters self-directed learning.

Conducting research for this piece was enlightening. It enabled me to revisit some basic counselling ideas and premises. But, more importantly, it gave me a much fuller idea of the difficulties coaching as an industry may face. The concern is that, if we coach at emotional depth, we are 'doing therapy' and that should be left to counsellors. I believe, from my own experience over many years, that good quality coaching delivered by multi-skilled therapists has many applications, and that practitioners can recognise and manage significant psychological issues. The appeal of coaching, for now, remains. For, despite the widespread knowledge of counselling, some people feel there is a stigma attached to it, that it has associations with

sickness or more entrenched mental health problems. I do hope this will continue to change, but in the meantime the reality for many is that coaching has a far more acceptable face. And coaching can fill a need when coaching is not enough and counselling is too much. Coaching helps healthy people become healthier, and those with emotional distress or mental health problems to become well. ■

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Sue Houghton is a BACP accredited counsellor. She is also a coach, clinical supervisor and freelance writer. Email: sue.houghton1@hotmail.co.uk Web: www.couching.org

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On the coach



Gladeana McMahon talks to **Linda Aspey** about her philosophy and work

LA *What drew you to coaching and how did your journey start?*

GM I first became involved in coaching in the early 1990s. Having been involved in what was then called 'counselling at work', I already had a range of corporate contacts. One of these called to ask if I could assist with a complex team issue involving a small group of individuals. However, he was adamant that I could not use any title that related to therapy or psychology. This gave me a dilemma as I had no idea what to call myself and he suggested that the term 'coach' would work. At that time I had very little understanding of what coaching was or what a coach might look like. However, being an activist, I went along with the idea. The intervention drew on my existing skills and yet was different. The situation was resolved and I thoroughly enjoyed the process. Around the same time I had become aware that there were limitations to what I could offer as a therapist. Very often clients would come to the end of their counselling but, although they had resolved their original issue, it was evident that there was more that could be done to help them live a rewarding life. At first I thought of this additional help as the need to develop practical life skills and then I came to realise that what I was actually spotting was a need for coaching. These two factors led to me wanting to know more about other methods of making a difference. The rest, as they say, is history...

LA *How did your career evolve from that point?*

GM I suppose my personality has always been one that is curious and open-minded. These qualities, together with the experience of working in a different way, led me to want to know more about different ways of working. My own practice had always been diverse as I have always enjoyed diversity and so it was not a challenge for me to take on board the concept of coaching. I realised the skills I already had could be adapted and that, with those clients who fell

into the executive coaching arena, I could bring to bear my knowledge, experience and training in relation to management and work-related issues. I was lucky in that I was offered opportunities to set up coaching offerings from scratch for Penna and then Fairplace/Cedar and I spent 11 years working part-time, building professional coaching practices. I never accepted a full-time position as retaining my autonomy was and still is a priority for me. However, these experiences developed me in ways that I found stimulating, energising and rewarding. Much of what I have achieved was not purposeful but more a product of my enthusiasm, curiosity and ability to think laterally.

It's probably no accident that the VIA (Values in Action) strengths indicator lists my top five strengths as creativity, humour/playfulness, love of learning, diligence and courage. It may surprise some people to know that I never really set out to create the career I have now. My whole career has been shaped by a series of happy accidents. I only became involved in the counselling world in 1976 because a friend asked me how to put an advert together as I had worked in recruitment. This call ended with me expressing an interest, being interviewed and then getting the job. Once I had the job, I felt as if I had 'found myself'. Then, in the early 1990s, as I mentioned earlier, I found myself again by accident starting a coaching journey. Someone once said, 'You just can't help yourself' and they probably had a point. I probably can't. If I see something I am interested in I just have to explore it, learn how to do it well, consider how to develop it and then move on to the next thing.

LA *What do you most enjoy about the work, and what are the challenges you personally face?*

GM I am fascinated by people: why they do what they do and how they can be the best they can be. This is a philosophy by which I have lived my own life. The more I learn, the more I realise how

little I know and how much more there is to learn. I also enjoy and am invigorated by all the 'hats' I wear and how the diversity helps keep me fresh and feeds my love of life and of the work I do. My challenge has always remained the same - that I have to continually hold myself back. My desire to know all there is to know and to be involved in everything has had to be tempered as I have become older. The simple fact is, there are only 168 hours in a week and if I take on too much then the quality of my delivery suffers, as much as my personal wellbeing. At first my enthusiasm and energy meant I could do all that I wanted to do but there came a point where I realised this was becoming self-defeating. Therefore, the challenge that I face is to constantly remind myself that I can only commit to a certain amount and have to turn down projects, whether personal or professional, because I won't do them justice. I suspect I will always have to work on this one!

LA *Coaching has become particularly popular over the last 10 or so years. Do you have a view as to why?*

GM This is a simple question to answer because the answer is so simple - namely, coaching continues to prove its value to organisations and individuals alike. Whether it's personal/life coaching or executive coaching, the growing body of evidence demonstrates how coaching adds value. There are now literally thousands of individuals who have benefited from coaching and who are advocates of the process. As organisations have developed their coaching offerings, they too have seen the value that coaching has added to their business. In addition, life has changed and continues to change at an amazing pace. I was born in a time when there were no mobile phones, computers, email or social networking and when the expectations of an individual and the chances available were of a different nature. It is therefore inevitable that

what worked in the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s is not relevant to today's world. New ways of looking at the world and developing talent have also had to change and this is where coaching has met that need.

LA *Do you have a particular life philosophy that is present in your coaching work?*

GM My own philosophy has always been to live life to the full, be curious, work hard and when you think you can't do something, find a way to do it. There is very little in life you cannot influence or change for the better. There may be times when you cannot get what you want and you have to have the wisdom to recognise these situations. However, diligence can get you more than you think. The more you know about people and how to communicate, the more you will get from life.

Everything in life can pretty much be broken down into a skill, whether practical, emotional, psychological or behavioural. You can always learn a new skill and, once you see life like this, then it is just a case of learning the skills you need.

No one is perfect, so the more you learn to accept yourself as a fallible human being, the more you will get from life, with the least stress. Learn from your mistakes and set yourself goals to achieve.

Life means experiencing your emotions and not trying to pretend they don't exist - emotions are what make us human. Respect and acknowledge these while remembering that there is a difference between what you feel and what you do.

You always have a choice about how you behave. Identify and work with your strengths and don't compare yourself with anyone else. There is nothing wrong with modelling yourself behaviourally on someone who has a skill set you would like to have and can develop. However, comparing yourself as inferior to anyone else can

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only lead to negative feelings, emotions and actions. Everyone is unique, so value yourself as a unique person.

Remember, you cannot please all of the people all of the time, so don't try. Be congruent, care for others, as kindness costs nothing, and remember, you always get back more than you give but that doesn't mean being a pushover.

Identify and check in on the values you hold about life and the meaning that life holds for you and do as much as you can to live your life according to these values. Value yourself as you value others and learn to be your own best friend. Be courageous as there is not much to fear in life apart from fear itself.

LA *Who or what have been your biggest influences in your professional life?*

GM This is a hard question to answer as there have been so many influences. There are those who have gone before, such as Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls, Albert Ellis and Arnold Lazarus, whom I have never met or seen in person. Then there are those philosophers and people of wisdom whose teachings hold truth, regardless of being thousands of years old. There are those who are living, such as Aaron Beck and Christine Padesky, who work in the area of CBT.

There are friends and colleagues, such as Stephen Palmer, Patrizia Collard and Pat Milner, with whom I have worked and whose energy and knowledge have added to mine. Then there are my friends and family who have given me love and support. I am beginning to feel as if I am at the Oscars - how can you single out from so many those without whom you would not be the person you are or have achieved the things you have?

LA *Working with clients/students/supervisees can be very demanding. How do you take care of yourself in the work and how do you switch off at the end of the day?*

GM If there is one thing I have learned during my 37 years of working with people, it's that self-care is essential, not only for me personally but also to ensure a good quality of service. I use a variety of methods, such as my coaching supervision, to debrief and offload any emotional baggage that may have accrued during my work. Working mostly on my own also means that, as I don't have the support of work colleagues, I have to create these relationships. It's one of the reasons that I have always taken roles in professional bodies as I not only feel as if I am making a difference and contributing to the development of that association and its aims; I am also part of a team environment.

In addition, on a more personal note, I ensure that I keep up with family and friends. A number of these work in different areas so the temptation to talk 'shop' is eliminated and I am kept in the real world. I make time to do the things I enjoy, such as reading or watching movies. I also make time for things that are good for me but I don't enjoy, such as exercising. I have been increasingly involved in mindfulness and make sure I undertake my own meditation on a daily basis, even if only for a short period of time. I am also very good at using a few minutes here and there throughout the day to engage in breathing exercises, which have a calming effect. I have also used both personal counselling and coaching at different times of my life when I have felt that I needed some dedicated space to explore certain issues, deal with life events or develop additional skills or mindsets.

LA *Is there anything else you would like to say to readers of Coaching Today?*

GM I suppose if I had one message to new coaches it is ensure you focus on your offering. I have been lucky because I was able to indulge my love of diversity. However, given the increasing numbers of those entering the coaching world, it is as important to be clear about your own unique offering as it is to be good at what you do.

LA *How would you like your life and your work to be remembered?*

GM I hope that in some small way I have contributed to the knowledge base in both counselling and coaching. I would also like to think that I have made a difference to the individuals with whom I have had the privilege to work as clients. I would also like to think that I have helped add value via my training work to those I have trained. Given all of this, I guess I would like to be remembered as someone who made a difference.

Thinking global brings thought-provoking articles related to our work in a whole-world context to stimulate our minds and extend our thinking.

I am writing this on 21 December 2012. Some say the world will end on this day. I don't know enough about the Mayan civilisation to understand more fully the context for this prophecy, nor the reasoning behind the conclusion. However, what if we take this opportunity to reframe... to open the possibility that today is the day we change the world? Every day affords us the chance to transform what has gone before, and build something new - a new vision for our personal future... a new vision for the future of this world.

What kind of world could we create? Do you believe it is possible?

In our work we are alongside others as they begin to heal past hurts and step out into a new future. Sometimes we focus more directly on the future and find past patterns rise to the surface bringing challenges, and feelings, to the fore. Our expertise in working with the full range of

human experience is what puts us in a unique position to hold the unfolding future.

I can distract myself by thinking my part is small, that I am merely a facilitator of the future, listener, or even follower. In my listening and facilitation I am also holding an intention for growth and a belief in human capacity to move forwards. Am I therefore also holding an intention for the growth of society towards a more glorious world? What might be the impact of this? Perhaps I am not so small after all.

In this article **Karen White** describes her passion for bringing techniques drawn from ancient martial arts into South Africa - playing her part in healing a nation and rejoicing in the co-creation of a positive future.

Jo Birch is Chair of BACP Coaching and series editor for Thinking Global

Thinking global





Crossing cultures

using our bodies as a doorway to wisdom

Karen White is working with **Wendy Palmer** to bring leadership embodiment to a diverse group of people in South Africa. In this article, she describes how she uses the principles of this Aikido-based practice in her work to access a deep, united wisdom that connects across the communities of her homeland.