



Choosing coaches or therapists – how to find who's right for you

As more and more people enter the personal therapy and coaching 'market' we're often faced with a bewildering array of choices and finding the 'right' coach or therapist can feel like searching for a needle in a haystack. As a result, some people give up almost before they've started – and others find themselves in a sub standard coaching or therapy relationship. Using the tips and questions that follow will help you approach the task confident that you can find a therapist or coach who's 'right' for you.

Coach or therapist?

Many people (both clients and coaches/therapists) use these words interchangeably. Indeed, except when italicised, that is how they're used in this article. It can, however, be helpful, before you start looking for someone to work with, to explore the potential differences of approach and consider which would be most helpful to you.

Coaches tend to focus on the future – on 'what now/next?' rather than focusing on the past and 'why'. They are not there to provide answers or solutions. Rather they see their role as being to offer processes that allow clients to think about things differently and create their own solutions. They work wholly or predominantly with the conscious, rational mind to help people clarify their desires, overcome obstacles, take action and create more positive futures.

Therapists tend to focus more, at least initially, on feelings and past events. They work more with the unconscious mind (often bringing it into consciousness) to get to the root of problems so that unhelpful patterns of behaviour can be let go.

Some coaches will use a range of therapeutic techniques to complement their practice and vice versa – so the distinctions are not always clear cut. When researching potential coaches, consider which approach is likely to be most helpful to you now – and whether you'd benefit most from a 'pure' approach or from working with someone who can offer a range of approaches and flex comfortably between them.

Specialist or generalist?

Some people prefer to work with someone they perceive as 'specialising' in whatever it is they want to work on. While this can help narrow the field, it's worth thinking about how important this criterion is relative to others.

What's more important for you – that someone has taken an extra course or worked solely or mainly with a particular client group, or that they have the skills and personal attributes to work effectively with you? The two aren't, of course, necessarily mutually exclusive, and if you could only have one – which would it be?

Age, sex, location

In choosing to work with a coach you're buying a service that is both professional and intensely personal. So it can be helpful to ask yourself

- Is age important? Would I feel more or less comfortable with someone a lot older or younger than me? Or doesn't that matter – is it more about the person and how they come across?
- Would I feel comfortable talking about my 'issue' with someone of the opposite sex? Or would I prefer to talk to someone of the same sex? Or, again, for me does this depend on the person themselves?
- How far am I willing to travel?
- Where does the therapist operate from? Is it a clinic or do they operate from home? Where would I feel more comfortable?
- What days of the week/times of the day would work best for me and can they accommodate this? Things to consider here include your regular commitments, energy levels during the week and what would be happening immediately after a session – would you be able to schedule in some 'down time' afterwards to help you continue any internal processing or action planning?

Qualifications and experience

This area can be a bit of a minefield. Currently, anyone can call themselves a coach or a therapist (some specific therapies are, of course, regulated) – no matter what level of training, skill or experience they have.

Some will be highly trained – and still lack some of the fundamental attributes that many people seek in a coach. Others may have undergone less training, and excel at what they do.

Some courses offer qualifications as a result of a formal and rigorous evaluation; others pay lip service to this. And it's not always easy to find out which is which. Other courses, which can have a huge beneficial impact, don't offer qualifications at all.

So, while it is worth asking some questions/doing some research about your prospective coach's qualifications, these need to be considered alongside other factors and a common sense applied.

So, ask

- When, where and with whom they trained
- How long their training lasted
- If formally evaluated/accredited – the criteria that were used
- How they've implemented it *and with what results.*

At the end of the day, results are the true test – there are some relatively new coaches and therapists who, while they may only have been practising for a matter of months, are already working at a high level. Conversely, there are coaches and therapists who've been practising for five or ten years, and who will only have a year's worth of experience – five or ten times over. So, add whatever information you glean about their qualifications and experience into the mix, but don't make it the be all and end all.

Consummate professional vs. well intentioned amateur

This isn't about money this is about how the coach approaches what they do.

Questions it's helpful to explore with them include

- Whether they hold public liability and professional indemnity insurance; it's rare that you'd need to make a claim, but the fact of whether or not they have adequate insurance can be an indicator of whether they regard themselves as a professional, with all the responsibilities that implies
- Whether they are a member of a professional organisation or similar body. Does that body have specific entry requirements and are members bound by its code of conduct
- If they're not, (and not all good coaches are, just as not all coaches who are members of various professional or accredited bodies are necessarily good), do they have a written code of conduct, ethics or values that they can show you

- Are there any areas they don't feel qualified/equipped to help with? What would they do if, part way into your sessions, they felt they weren't the best person to help you? There are no universally right or wrong answers here – what you're looking for is a sense of authenticity, self awareness and a focus on your needs as a person rather than on their needs as a business
- What do they do to keep their knowledge and skills up to date? If they're not investing in their continuing professional development it may be a sign that they're not fully committed to providing the best possible service
- What professional support/supervision do they receive? For some, it is a requirement of their professional body that they undergo regular professional supervision sessions; others will have a more informal mentoring or practice group arrangement. Again, there are no right or wrong answers here- it's about reassuring yourself that they have at least asked themselves the question, and that their answer sits comfortably with you.

Having said this isn't about money – do be sure to ask about it! Fees vary enormously and are not necessarily an indicator of quality. Even if you are working to a budget, I'd suggest that before you start looking for a coach you ask yourself 'what would it be worth to me if I could x', where 'x' is whatever you want as a result of your coaching or therapy. How much are you willing to invest in yourself? And when (and only when) you've decided that, ask about fees. The consummate professional will have a clear fee structure and terms of service and will be able to tell you

- Whether there is any contractual commitment
- What is the process for reviewing and/or stopping the coaching relationship
- Whether there are any financial implications of stopping prior to completion/before a set number of sessions.

References and testimonials

Most coaches are able and happy to provide these. Whilst these may give some reassurance that the person hasn't simply woken up that morning and declared themselves to be a therapist, they probably have limited use beyond that.

Some therapists will, if asked, put you in contact with previous clients so that you can ask them questions about the process or how they experienced working with them. The fact that someone doesn't do this isn't necessarily a contra indicator – it's quite possible that their clients, whilst wholly satisfied with the service they received, are private people who have no wish to speak to strangers about something which, for them, is quite personal. So, if it's important to you, by all means ask if the coach is willing to ask if previous clients would be willing to talk with you (and if they're not willing to at least ask the question, you may want to explore why this is) but if no clients are willing this isn't necessarily a concern.

Try before you buy

Many therapist and coaches will offer a free session of some sort. Usually this is an explanatory meeting or phone call, to give you a chance to ask key questions to help you decide whether this person is right for you. Occasionally, they may begin to 'work' the issue with you. It can be helpful to clarify and agree the purpose and format of any free session before you start.

A good coach or therapist will also use this session to assess whether they feel that they are someone who could work effectively with you. It is, or should be, a two way thing. If they let you know this before the session (saying something like 'this discussion will also help us identify the extent to which I'm the right person to work with you') they're focussed on achieving the best results for you – even if this means turning work away.

Follow your intuition

While there is, as outlined above, some factual information that can help inform your decision making process, at its heart it is an intuitive process. The suggestions and questions in this article will help you narrow the field (or reduce the size of the haystack!); after that, it's up to you.

So, having narrowed the field,

- Talk to or meet at least two or three coaches before making up your mind
- If, having done so, you're not comfortable with any of them – talk with or meet some more
- Remember that you're not looking for 'THE' one – there will be more than one coach or therapist with whom you can work effectively. So, when you find someone who feels right – stop looking
- Ask yourself – at a gut or heart rather than head level – do I feel a sense of connection with this person? Can I imagine myself talking openly with them about difficult, painful or embarrassing subjects?

Choosing a coach or therapist is a time when you can afford to be utterly selfish. If your gut feel is that 'this won't work' – then it won't. You'll be doing yourself – and the therapist – a favour by listening and responding to that. Equally, if you have a strong or warm vibe that 'I could really work with this person' then listen to that, too. Don't over analyse it – go with it.

And always that remember that, having made the choice, if after a while you find it is no longer working, you are perfectly free to un-decide. The consummate professional will both understand and respect that.

About Pure Serendipity

At Pure Serendipity we're passionate about helping you increase your luck and make the most of life.

Whether you already have specific goals in mind or just a vague but fairly constant feeling that it could be better, we can help you take charge of your mental and physical state, create better relationships, increase your motivation, and confidence and communicate effectively to achieve the success you want.

We can use a range of coaching, NLP and hypnotherapy to help you

- Clarify your aspirations—helping you work out what you really want and how you'll know when you've achieved it
- Identify and take the steps needed to bring about positive and lasting change
- Develop attitudes and behaviours—be that motivation, confidence, tenacity, whatever is needed - to underpin your success both now and in the future.

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