



Choosing the Right Support



Coaching, Therapy, and
Mentorship Explained

Choosing the Right Support: Coaching, Therapy, and Mentorship Explained

What Kind of Support Should You Seek?

It's common to feel unsure about what kind of support is most helpful at certain points in your life and career. Should you work with a therapist or a coach? Would a mentor be more useful? And what exactly is the difference between these kinds of support? In this article, we look at the differences between three types of helping relationships and distinguish the core purpose of each one.

Let's start with the distinction many people ask about first: **Coaching versus Therapy**.

Coaching or Therapy?

[Washington Post, 2022](#): "Although both professions can help you get to a better place than where you began, therapists are trained to treat mental illness or other significant emotional and relational concerns, while coaches seek to help you elevate performance in a specific area."

One helpful way to think about the difference is this:

- **Therapy** often helps you understand and heal the past so you can be well in the present.
- **Coaching** uses what is happening for you now to help you grow into a desired future—developing new skills, mindsets, and behaviors along the way.

Of course, there is overlap. Human experience doesn't split neatly into "past" and "future." We are always working from the present moment.

Take an example topic you might bring to a mentor or a coach: **“Imposter Syndrome.”**

In therapy, a client might explore:

- Early experiences, family systems, and formative environments
- How patterns of self-doubt developed
- What needs care, soothing, or repair

** Note: I am not a therapist—I simply have one. What I share here reflects my lived experience, not clinical expertise.*

In coaching, we would work differently:

- We would look at the *specific thoughts* that come up around “I’m an imposter.”
- We would explore how those thoughts may be trying to protect you—even as they hold you back.
- We would get curious about the emotions and sensations that accompany the pattern.
- Then we would look underneath: *What beliefs or fears are fueling this? What values are trying to express themselves?*
- And finally, we’d look forward:
 - *What would you rather believe?*
 - *What thoughts and feelings reflect who you want to be?*
 - *What actions, practiced consistently, would help bring that new identity to life?*

Coaching, at its best, is about **agency, awareness, inner-alignment with your own values, and intentional growth.**

This is why many people benefit from working with both a therapist *and* a coach. Therapy supports healing and self-understanding. Coaching, while also supporting self-understanding, also supports action, momentum, and meaningful change. When paired, the two can be deeply reinforcing.

Coaching or Mentoring?

The distinction between coaching and mentoring can be subtle, because some professionals blend the two. However, mentors tend to give advice as the primary way of helping, while coaches tend to ask questions and name what they notice as their primary way of helping.

With a **mentor**, you are more likely to walk away with:

- Notes on what *they* recommend
- Contacts, resources, or strategies they've found valuable

With a **coach**, you are more likely to walk away with:

- Notes on *what you discovered about yourself*
- Clarity about what matters to you
- A sense of direction that feels authentic and self-sourced

Returning to the **"Imposter Syndrome"** example:

- A **mentor** might share stories of how they overcame it, encourage you, and offer guidance on skills or connections that helped them.
- A **coach** might help you understand *your* relationship to the feeling, *your* beliefs about capability and worth, and *your* path for stepping into a more grounded sense of confidence.

Both are valuable relationships. They simply serve different purposes.

You Don't Need to Choose Just One

You can work with a therapist, a coach, and a mentor at the same time—and many people do. What matters is understanding **what kind of support each provides** and how you want to use it.

Let's synthesize as simply as possible, the core purpose for each type of helping relationship:

- **Therapy** helps you **heal** — working through past or present emotional pain to restore well-being.
- **Coaching** helps you **grow** — developing new skills, mindsets, and behaviors to move toward your goals.
- **Mentoring** helps you **navigate** — learning from someone's lived experience to make informed decisions and find your path.

These types of support can absolutely overlap, and every practitioner brings their own unique style. But understanding the core purpose of each can help you choose the right kind of support for the right moment in your journey.



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