

## **Collaborative Coaching: How is it Different from Therapy?**

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This article will refer to coaching within the Collaborative Practice model, and particularly to coaching in the context of family law matters such as separation, divorce, custody, pre-marital, domestic partnership and pre-domestic partnership, and paternity matters.

When clients are entering into Collaborative Practice processes, they may wonder about how the coaching process will differ from psychotherapy. There are several elements of how coaching will have a different focus from and will be experienced differently from therapy.

With regard to specific informed consent regarding the role the therapist will play, clients need to know that in a therapeutic relationship, the therapist's job is to diagnose and treat a client's mental or emotional difficulties. As a coach in a family law matter, a therapist will be treating a situational difficulty, as opposed to an internal difficulty. The focus will be specific and short-term, involving the client's education about, adjustment to and attitude around the tasks of the Family Law challenge, as well as specific and at-hand help during the process of making agreements for the family's ongoing well-being.

When a therapist and an individual client form a working relationship, the therapist becomes the client's advocate and tends to believe the client's perspective quite thoroughly. The coach-client relationship is somewhat different: the coach is an advocate for the client's needs within the situation, but is also aware that the other coach and client will have a different perspective and a different set of needs, as will any other members of the collaborative team such as the collaborative lawyers and the neutral financial expert. The coaches, after meeting with their clients, will then share information with one another and with other team members, in order to build an understanding of the entire situation. The coaches are committed to helping the family come to agreements that will benefit the family as a whole, so they will work toward helping the involved family members gain a fuller understanding of each other's needs and perspectives. When difficult thoughts and emotions seem to inhibit the clients from reaching agreements, coaches will help clients (either in "2-way" or "4-way" sessions), to contain, process or reframe those emotions. In this way, clients are often freer to accept different perspectives. They also learn to trust that the team and the process can help them represent their best selves during the separation or divorce. This makes the process less stressful and damaging both for clients and for any children they may have. If there *are* children, the coaches will keep the parents focused as much as possible on what the children need and the importance of working together for their benefit. There is clearly a whole-family focus in coaching that is quite different from what clients usually expect in a therapy situation.

Therapy, unless it is deliberately short-term, often involves a look at the client's entire life; job satisfaction, relationships, values and goals, etc. Also, therapy is likely to delve, to various degrees, into a client's past in order to gain a fuller understanding of the current life situation, direction and obstacles. Coaching usually will not delve into a client's past very much, but is focused rather on the current situation and future outcome. For instance, a client who is not accepting that a divorce is happening may have a great deal of trouble moving forward, either to provide needed information for the divorce process, or to take the necessary steps to build a new life. Coaching can help clients identify the lack of acceptance, the need to grieve and move on, and some support to do so. Also, coaching will focus more on current skills and abilities in the areas of communication, negotiation, self-control and parenting, in an attempt to help clients through the particularly difficult time of separation or divorce, and will also prepare clients to co-parent for the rest of the children's lives. Coaches will teach, exhort, direct and model for the clients in a very active way. This can feel very different from therapy, where there may be a more free-flow approach to the work and which often is much more client-directed.

As a coach *and* a therapist, I love both approaches for different reasons. Great benefit may be had from either approach. Often both approaches will be needed during a separation or divorce; a coach can focus specifically on the divorce issues while a therapist helps the client deal with feelings and old issues brought up by the inevitable changes of divorce.

Family law matters undoubtedly provide situations that challenge the healthiest among us to act with dignity and maturity. Given that unusually important decisions need to be made at these times, and that very often overpoweringly difficult feelings may be present as well, it only makes sense to employ a guide to help negotiate this challenging time of life.