

# Counseling? Health Coaching? Life Coaching? What's Best for Me?

By Anne Massey, MS Nutrition Health Coach

Various life situations call for distinct solutions. Mental health counseling, health and wellness coaching, and life coaching may share similarities; however, they each cater to distinct needs. Determining what's best for you depends on your specific needs and goals.

## The distinction between coach and counselor

A coach is a collaborator and accountability partner working with clients to develop and follow a roadmap toward positive change. While health and wellness coaching and life coaching are similar in style, the primary differences are their backgrounds and the topics covered.

You're likely familiar with mental health counseling services that you can access independently, through your organization's member assistance program (MAP), or by referral. Mental health counseling sessions focus on improving emotional functioning in present-day life with the counselor as an expert who provides direction, guidance, and professional clinical recommendations. Counselors help clients feel better; coaches help clients do better.

## Health and wellness coaching

Health and wellness coaches focus on helping individuals make lifestyle changes to improve their physical health and wellbeing. They can assist with weight management, nutrition, exercise, stress or sleep management, and other health-related goals. Health coaching is suitable if you have health and wellness goals and need guidance and accountability to achieve them. Some examples of situations that are appropriate for health and wellness coaching include:

- Guidance for those who desire to reach healthy weight goals without the use of traditional or restrictive diets
- Direction for those who desire to improve eating or exercise habits
- Support for people with concerns about diabetes because of family history or other reasons
- Strategies for those who want to quit the use of tobacco and/or nicotine products
- Help with developing healthy stress coping skills and implementing proven techniques
- Tips on improving sleep quality
- Self-care practices to achieve personal wellbeing

## Life coaching

Life coaches work with individuals to help them set and achieve personal and professional goals. They can provide support, motivation, and strategies for improving various aspects of life, such as career, relationships, and personal development. Life coaching is ideal if you're looking to make positive changes, set and achieve goals, and enhance your overall life satisfaction.

What types of situations are appropriate for life coaching?

- Developing industry relevant skills
- Planning for a career change
- Adapting to a new life (a new normal) after a loss
- Starting or finishing a project at work or a personal project at home
- Creating greater balance by learning how to manage competing life priorities

## Mental health counseling

Mental health counselors can provide guidance and support for immediate concerns, but the scope may be limited compared to long-term therapy.

What types of situations are appropriate for mental health counseling?

- Emotional distress, pain, or a history of trauma that is affecting daily life functioning
- A mental health diagnosis requiring treatment, or if already in treatment, an unmanaged mental health disorder
- Unmanaged depression, anxiety or grief
- Suicidal or homicidal ideation
- Violence or abuse
- Work with couples or families

Note that counseling delivered to you through your organization, such as MAP counseling, is typically a short-term, solution-focused therapy to help employees or members address personal or work-related issues. It is ideal if you are facing specific challenges like anxiety, relationship issues, or workplace difficulties.

To decide what's best for you, consider your current situation and objectives. If you're dealing with specific emotional or work-related issues, mental health counseling may be the right choice. If you have health-related goals, a health and wellness coach could help you. If you're seeking to make broader life improvements to achieve personal and professional goals, a life coach might be the best fit.

Keep in mind that health and wellness coaching and life coaching are not counseling or therapy; it is not a substitute for mental health counseling or treatment. If you are coping with mental health issues, call your organization's assistance program to speak to a counselor who can offer you support. ■

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