



# Coaching for people in recovery

## Recovery coaches can offer an effective adjunct to treatment

It takes time and requires patience for any new idea to become integrated effectively into an existing culture. Recovery coaching is a relatively new idea. It is just beginning to gain serious traction, showing strong signs of being much more than a passing fad. Consolidation and acquisitions within the addiction treatment industry will make coaching more attractive to administrators who want to find ways to differentiate their programs and to deliver high-quality care in the most cost-effective manner possible.

Once it has been shown—and I believe it will be—that relapse and recidivism rates are lower in recovering individuals who engage in coaching, both inpatient and outpatient treatment centers likely will begin to offer coaching routinely as a value-added service.

Coaching has its roots in the human potential movement. Some noted names in this arena include Stephen Covey, Tony Robbins, and Landmark Forum. When it

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became apparent that a great many individuals were benefiting from reading the work of these high-profile authors, listening to their motivational audio courses, and attending workshops conducted by these and many other leaders, the concept of coaching on a more personal scale emerged. Coach training organizations began to appear to educate and certify professionals from all walks of life to be coaches.

Coaching school graduates specialize in a variety of areas, including life coaching, executive and leadership coaching, and transition coaching. Recovery coaching is a relatively new addition to the coaching sub-specialty list.

### A personal story

Two years into my own recovery, I decided to pursue my dream of becoming a coach. I had worked in large corpora-

tions as an organizational and leadership development specialist for more than two decades. My career had begun to feel flat and I was ready for a change. Upon enrolling at The Hudson Institute of Santa Barbara, one of the country's premier coach training organizations, I was delighted to be immersed in the learning process once again. I found that being around other people who were excited about the same thing I was—human potential—fed my soul.

To be in an intensive coaching training program is to do some serious self-evaluation. I was able to ponder my past in a way that I never had before. I looked at everything I had been through, including 25 years of hard work to become a successful career woman while, at the same time, drinking myself into full-blown alcoholism. It was during my coaching training program that I became acutely aware of how misaligned my life had been and how, if I was going to stay sober and

## What addiction professionals should know about

The coach-client relationship is a personal one. Individuals who choose to engage a coach for support during recovery should do so carefully. Recovery professionals should know the following about the process of helping a client select a coach:

- **Certification.** Because coaching is largely unregulated, anyone can hang out a shingle and call themselves a coach. Clients might want to choose a coach who has been through a formal training program at a school recognized by the International Coach Federation (ICF).
- **Membership.** Minimally, a coach should be an ICF member and ideally, a recovery coach will also be a member of Recovery Coaches International. Membership in these organizations demonstrates that the coach takes his/her career seriously and keeps up on the latest trends and changes in the field.
- **Experience.** To work with individuals in recovery, a coach will ideally have not only the education and credentials in coaching along with a few years of experience, but will also have either personal or professional experience in dealing with addiction (if the recovery coach is himself or herself also in recovery, all the better).
- **Connection.** An individual selecting a recovery coach should interview at least two or three before selecting one. That certain special connection and resonance between coach and client must be in place in order for the process to be effective.
- **Non-compete.** Recovery Coaches that have been working in the industry for some time will recognize they are not in competition with the treatment professional. A good coach knows where they start and stop.

do something valuable, I had to get into much better alignment—personally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Living a dual life was no longer an option.

Part of the process of becoming a certified coach is to engage a coach and experience the process firsthand. During weekly sessions over several months, my coach held me accountable and kept me focused on achieving my new goals, which included leaving the corporate world, designing and launching my coaching practice, and moving to Colorado to support my effort to work with individuals in recovery in a serene setting. As a result of my own coaching, I am now doing the work I love and—I hope—making a difference in the lives of others.

I'm sharing much of my story because what I experienced while training to become a coach is exactly the process I and many other coaches bring to clients in recovery. The Hudson Institute training program emphasizes adult development, values, purpose, and how to become more aligned to create a better future. To my mind, that is exactly what people in early stages of recovery need.

### What coaching is and isn't

Let's first address what coaching isn't. It is *not*:

- Therapy. Well-trained coaches are very aware of the line between therapy and coaching and are careful to honor that line and refer out to therapists when indicated.
- A replacement for primary treatment, a 12-Step program, or clinical care.
- A substitute for or the equivalent of a "sober companion" or "sober coach."
- For anyone still actively involved with their substance of choice.
- About affirmations, positive thinking, or platitudes.

Now let's look at what coaching is and how it is useful in the recovery process. High-quality coaching is:

- **Focused on the future.** While an understanding of the client's past is important, the recovery coaching process is intended to help the client envision and go about creating a positive future. For some clients this means

crafting a comprehensive "life plan." For others, coaching is focused on specific themes, gaps in personal development, or how to navigate effectively the re-entry into work and life following treatment.

- **A robust, intentional process and relationship.** A well-trained coach stays intently focused on what the client wants and helps the client identify his/her own agenda and stick to it. Coaching should never be about what the coach thinks is best for the client. While the coach may educate and offer ideas, giving direct advice is discouraged.
- **Based on action and accountability.** The coach supports the client in envisioning a positive future and then quickly getting into action to create that future. The coach's job is also to hold the client accountable for follow-through without blaming or shaming the client when not every goal is achieved. It is not uncommon for the coach to continue to hold and honor a client's vision when the client has temporarily lost sight of it. For someone in recovery this is of tremendous importance, because the years of self-doubt and shame can at times prevent the person from feeling confident, competent, and whole.
- **Best used for a defined period of time.** Unlike a 12-Step program that an individual might participate in for a lifetime, or clinical therapy that might need to continue for several years to be effective, the action-oriented nature of coaching means that it rarely continues for more than a year and often is needed only for a few sessions or a few months.
- **Effective only when an individual is "ready."** Like treatment for addiction in all its forms, coaching is useful only when a client is truly ready. This means that the client is on a solid path toward a solid recovery, has dealt with his/her most significant "past" issues, and has the time and energy to devote to mapping out a new life. The client must be in the position to put energy toward creating a positive future while also maintaining a focus on recovery. Some coaches, myself included, use assessments and questionnaires to assess an individual's readiness to engage in coaching.

### Recovery coaching's future

According to the organization Recovery Coaches International, there are currently 35 certified recovery coaches in the United States. These individuals have undergone additional training and provide coaching services for people in recovery from alcoholism, drug addiction, smoking, and sex addiction. Some recovery coaches also specialize in working with family members of those in recovery.

Recovery coaching is currently being offered in several treatment centers across the country. It has yet to be integrated into primary care programs as a formal part of clinical treatment. I believe this is because of uncertainty over where recovery coaching fits in. There is a pilot project in development to integrate recovery coaching into the treatment model for individuals in an extended-care setting. This project, spearheaded by Andrew Susskind,

MSW, ACC (co-founder of Recovery Coaches International), has a goal of creating metrics designed to measure the success of coaching for people who have been in recovery for six months or more.

Recovery coaching is emerging in the area of continuing care. Coaching is currently being used at the Open Door Retreat in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, a women's treatment organization that offers a transitional continuing care program, and at my own lodge in Pagosa Springs, Colorado. At both centers, a weeklong coaching intensive is followed by one-on-one coaching. Coaching is effective with individuals in recovery because it creates an intimate space for them to show up and be purposeful and accountable. One of the



noted differences between coaching and other forms of treatment for people in recovery is that coaching is focused on the "well" person, not the "sick" one. I attended AA and had therapy once a week during the first years of my new life, but it wasn't until I engaged my own coach that I was able to focus on making my spirit flourish—instead of on the splintered addictive aspects of my old life.

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