

Should You See a Therapist or a Life Coach?

Spoiler: Both could Work

By [Lindsay Holmes](#), Huffpost, Healthy Living, January 3, 2016

Everyone can use a little extra support when handling life's challenges — and one way to get it is by talking with a professional.

Before you immediately dismiss the idea, consider this: Research has shown that [verbalizing feelings can have a significant therapeutic effect on the brain](#). In other words, getting your worries out in the open (even the “insignificant” ones) — particularly with someone trained to help you manage them — is a *good* thing for your well-being.

So, say you've decided to take the plunge and get some professional help. Should you [seek out a therapist](#), or would a life coach benefit you more? It's important, firstly, to understand [how the two differ](#) (though regardless of the differences, or which route you go with, you're still making a choice to better your life — and there's nothing bad about that).

Therapists, whether classified as [psychologists or counselors](#), have varying master's and doctorate degrees and are [licensed by their state](#). With psychotherapy, also known as talk therapy, licensed professionals focus on the long-term and [work on ways to understand your thoughts, moods and behaviors](#).

Life coaches, on the other hand, are encouraged to obtain certification through an accredited program like the [International Coaching Federation](#) (although it's [not required](#) as the profession [isn't regulated](#)). And unlike with therapists, there are no degree requirements. Life coaches aim to [motivate, offer emotional support and create confidence in their clients](#). Many former psychologists and counselors have [gone on to become life coaches](#).

An article published by the American Counseling Association [likens therapy and life coaching to step-siblings](#): sharing similar traits, but each using different approaches. Many life coaches focus on creating a new life path in order to achieve goals, whereas therapy sometimes looks into emotional resolutions to past problems in order to move forward, according to Counseling Today.

But as author and clinical psychologist Michael Bader [writes](#), it doesn't matter how conflated the two can be — what matters is what you get from the practice:

The biggest difference between coaching and therapy, in my view, is that the theory that guides my work as a therapist can explain how coaching does or does not work, while theories that guide coaches can't do the same about therapy. This difference, while true, seems inconsequential to me. What matters is that people get help in their efforts to grow, master their problems and become more effective in their lives.

According to David Spiegel, associate chair of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University, anyone should be open to seeking professional guidance when it comes to their emotional health.

“We’re social creatures, fundamentally, so talking to people can be a real source of support and help,” Spiegel told The Huffington Post. “But it won’t happen if you don’t give it a try.”

Here are some ways therapy or life coaching can make you happier and mentally healthier, and improve your life:

Therapy can help you handle emotions from problems or stressors, even if they aren’t dramatically life-altering or traumatic.

Therapy is well-known for its [problem-solving techniques](#) and reputation as a tool for overcoming [anxiety](#), [depression](#) and [addiction](#). But as Spiegel explains, it’s also a way to establish better emotional wellness in your daily life.

“Therapy can be an interpersonal laboratory,” Spiegel said. “It’s a way of working with cognition, emotion and interpersonal relationships in a way that helps you manage your emotions and learn to see it in a different perspective.”

In other words, you don’t have to go through a huge life event or trauma to benefit from therapy. Talking with a professional allows you to get a sense of how you appear to other people, helps you get feedback on whatever you’re feeling and offers insight on how those emotions are affecting your everyday life.

Life coaches can hold you accountable for your goals.

Whether you want to lose weight or make a significant career change, talking to a professional life coach can help you get over those mental blocks you encounter with any challenge. And as New York-based life coach Stefanie Ziev explains, having someone to answer to will also hold you accountable for your progress.

“I feel like we live in a society where everybody thinks they have to do it alone,” she told HuffPost. “I think we are just better together. I think the major benefit of seeking someone is that it brings you massive support and creates accountability when it comes to going after your goals.”

And there’s [science](#) to support this notion. Research shows that [social support can help build resilience against stress](#) — a useful tool if you’re trying to make a significant life change.

Talking with someone can help you find purpose.

When you speak to a professional, whether it be a life coach or a therapist, Ziev stresses the importance of opening yourself up to what you’re struggling with and where you’d like to go

from there. This allows you to work toward a goal, which can bring confidence, peace of mind and, ultimately, more meaning to life.

“This really works for people who are seeking more meaning in their lives, personally and professionally,” Ziev said. “It clarifies your purpose... particularly when you’re feeling depleted in life.”

A professional can help you dissect a problem — then help you figure out how to solve it.

Just as a life coach can help you formulate a plan to make a significant change in your life, therapy can help you develop a strategy to handle a current hardship you may be facing. Spiegel says that speaking with a professional allows you to look at any hill you’re climbing from a new angle.

“You learn about perspective on whatever the problem is you’re struggling with,” Spiegel explained. “You can see the problem without feeling overwhelmed with anxiety or sadness even though the problem is still there. In that way, therapy can help you re-contextualize the problem you’re dealing with in order to make a strategy to help you move forward.”

Spiegel stresses the importance of doing a little research to find a licensed professional that aligns best with your situation — and to then embrace that person with an open mind.

“There’s some stigma that you feel that you don’t need emotional support,” he said. “You don’t have to be severely mentally ill to get help. [Talking with a professional] can get you through difficult situations in life and you’re stronger if you do that.”

A previous version of this article appeared in [August 2014](#).