

Nurturing spiritual dimensions in coaching:

a growing frontier



DeeAnna Merz Nagel and Madison Leigh Akridge explore the developing area of spiritual coaching and explain how they aim to contribute to the field with a new collection of case studies

What happens when you set out to teach on the topic of spiritual coaching and find there is almost no professional literature available? When I, DeeAnna Merz Nagel (DMN) was asked by a university seeking to offer a spiritual coaching graduate certificate, to curate a curriculum and teach a course, I decided to partner with fellow coach and colleague, Madison Leigh Akridge (MLA). Together, we enlisted key experts in the field of spiritual coaching and invited them to contribute their insights. In this way, a book was born from that realisation. Our mission was clear: to gather seasoned spiritual coaches who have shaped this emerging area of the coaching profession, alongside new spiritual coaches who bring diverse perspectives. We asked them to share their work through a variety of case studies, showcasing their diverse backgrounds and approaches for others to learn from. In doing so, we aimed to foster a community dedicated to this vital work.

As certified coaches and licensed mental health practitioners in counselling and social work, we have both long been aware of the prominence of 'spiritually integrated psychotherapy' and 'spiritually informed social work' in our fields, and have integrated these concepts into our practices. However, we found a significant gap in the literature when applying these terms to coaching. Our book seeks to fill that gap and provide guidance for coaches whose clients bring spiritual content into their session, emphasising essential coaching skills such as active listening, powerful questioning and goal setting, within the context of spiritual coaching.

Coaching as a distinct profession

When exploring spiritually informed coaching in this context, it is important to first acknowledge that coach theory and applications are distinct from those of other helping relationships such as counselling, mentoring or consulting. While coaching is rooted in psychology, and specifically in positive psychology, each can be used independently. In general, to date, coaching does not have a defined legal scope of practice. While counselling is becoming regulated by many countries, although not in the UK, and has specific rules governing its scope, coaching, on the other hand, is guided by professional associations that offer competences and ethical codes to guide coach professionals. BACP's Coaching Competence Framework is a solid example of such guidance.¹

Differences between coaching and counselling

As coach practitioners and educators, we understand the main differences between coaching and counselling. Both involve working closely with a professional who is qualified to help set goals, provide support, give guidance and feedback. In our experience, the main difference between the two methods is that counselling focuses more on emotional pain and healing old wounds, whereas coaching focuses on developing skills and behaviours to grow. Both disciplines use similar skills and techniques such as active listening and powerful questioning.

Differences between religion and spirituality

In order to set the context for a deeper understanding of spiritual coaching, we define the differences between religion and spirituality as religion encompassing individual or organised belief systems, rituals and behaviours pertaining to spirituality. Spirituality, on the other hand, focuses on the soul or spirit rather than material concerns, embodying the essence that enlivens our bodies, also known as consciousness. It involves connecting with the spirit using all our senses, known and unknown, such as sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell. The spirit is referred to by various names like God, Creator, Divine, Great Spirit, Source, Elohi, Allah, etc.²

Defining spiritual coaching, spiritual counselling and spiritual direction

Now we come to the question: what is spiritual coaching? We have already emphasised the need to understand the difference between coaching and counselling. Counselling, in general, aims to correct maladaptive behaviour that leads to dysfunctional living, while coaching is mainly proactive and focuses on the client's goals and outcomes.

It is also important to understand the difference between *spiritual direction* and coaching. Spiritual direction is the process of journeying and discussing with others to connect with the Divine, who, as stated above, can be referenced in many ways.² Spiritual direction can be non-directive. While spiritual exercises are sometimes used, it is more about listening to the spiritual story of the directee. Spiritual directors are midwives for the soul, helping others to develop their spiritual growth. Spirituality is an experience of the process.

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Spirituality can emerge in coaching sessions that are otherwise centred on different aspects of life, such as work and wellness

Spiritual coaching is more proactive and focuses on client outcomes and goals, but with a spiritual perspective. The coaching process is infused with spirituality, whether directly or indirectly. Many coaches address spiritual issues within the coaching relationship, whether or not they define themselves as 'spiritual coaches'. Spirituality is often a topic that arises in the coaching relationship, whether a practitioner calls themselves a 'spiritual coach' specifically or goes by other titles like 'life coach', 'wellness coach', or 'executive coach'. Spirituality can be expressed overtly by a client when they describe an experience during a religious service, for example; or it may be expressed covertly through the experienced benefits of art, community or physical activities.

Some coaches are faith-based. For example, a Christian coach might describe themselves as a spiritual coach. The coach may suggest that a devout Christian read Bible passages, or engage in exercises using sacred texts or practices within their chosen religion. Some spiritual coaches work outside the boundaries of religion, while using some of these practices. These coaches might use a variety of tools, including Reiki, essential oils, yoga and literature on mindfulness. A coach-client pair based on shared religion might choose a prayer from their own tradition to use in a coaching session. However, a pair based on spirituality might use guided meditation, or a writing activity, using prompts from their respective specialties.³

Trained as coaches and therapists, and researching how spirituality shows up with clients, we believe that coaching is a process of spiritual integration. Spiritually integrated coaching is practised by any coach who recognises that the client's spiritual content, whether direct/overt or indirect/covert, will be brought into the coaching process.

Now we will look at spiritually integrated psychotherapy in order to better understand how these concepts can be applied to coaching.

The spiritually integrated therapist

Spiritually integrated therapy explores the ways in which spirituality and religion influence clients' lives, as well as the therapists themselves.

Spiritually informed social workers believe that the integration of religion and spirituality in their work, and using those parts that support resilience and strength building (for clients who wish to do so) can support behavioural psychology work.

Spiritually conscious psychotherapy can be categorised on a continuum, ranging from an outright avoidance to a direct and explicit focus. At one extreme of the continuum, spiritually avoidant psychotherapy is where the practitioner tries to avoid any issues relating to spirituality. The practitioner may even avoid the topic altogether if the client requests a discussion. At the other end, the practitioner focuses on the spirituality of the client with the goal of helping clients resolve issues, through maintaining or changing religious/spiritual behaviours and beliefs. The continuum includes the spiritually informed practitioner, and the practitioner who is spiritually integrated. Both practitioners are able to hold space for a client's process of spirituality within the therapeutic relationship, without explicitly seeking to maintain or transform religious or spiritual beliefs or behaviours.⁴

The spiritually integrated coach

We can examine the concept of implicit (indirect), and explicit (direct), content in the coaching conversation to better understand spiritually integrated coaching.

Spiritually integrated coaching can include explicit content; for example, a client may share that reading the Bible every day is a useful discipline. Another client may describe how reading daily positive affirmations is a helpful exercise. The first is an explicit example of spiritual content, while the second is an implicit example. Both implicit and explicit content are relevant to a spiritually integrated coach. Images of God, prayers within sessions and references to sacred texts are examples of explicit content, while implicit content may be expressed as existential anxiety or hope versus depression, and themes of loneliness and solitude. Existential issues show up by way of four main concerns: death and freedom, existential loneliness and meaninglessness. These existential themes can be seen in coaching sessions as goals and issues related to one's career, relationships or living a more fulfilling, meaningful life.^{5,6}

Whether a coach is working from the framework of energy healing, 12-step support or a specific religion, the goal of coaching is the same. The work is focused on helping the client expand their inner belief system, regardless of religious or spiritual beliefs. With spiritually integrated coaching, even clients who have had negative experiences with a religious upbringing can find their core strength and live from this place. It doesn't matter if the coach/client pair agrees or disagrees about a particular set of beliefs. Clients who are unbelievers can also benefit from spiritual coaching when they're offered the opportunity to use their intuition, gut instinct, or understanding of their situation as being existential.⁷

Our aim is to transfer wisdom from the existing field of spiritually integrated psychotherapy to coaches, creating a new group of spiritually integrated coaches. By incorporating the concepts of integration into coaching, coaches also demonstrate cultural humility. They honour differences, while learning and examining culturally spiritual experiences to guide clients towards goal achievement.

The coach can develop a holistic perspective by combining topics that were historically separated, such as spirituality and psychology. This concept combines the wisdom traditions with modern coaching practices. The coaching encounter can be refreshed by focusing on what the soul desires.

Coaching with integrity

Coaching is a fun, inspiring, collaborative and meaningful profession, which can enhance people's lives. Over the last few decades, the coaching profession has grown rapidly and expanded to every industry, from corporate to healthcare.

Spiritual coaching is an expanding subspecialty in the field of coaching. The many ways spiritual coaching is offered might lead one to believe that it's difficult to identify the common elements within this subspecialty. On the contrary, solid coach competences can be demonstrated in all the varying approaches within the niche of spiritual coaching.

Solid spiritual coaching is interwoven with ethical expectations, listening skills and powerful questions. Depending on the coaching approach used, metaphors, appreciative enquiry and goal setting are also woven in. Solid coach training programmes offer teachings regarding cultural competency. Spiritual literacy falls under the subset of cultural competency, and both cultural competences and spiritual literacy sit under the umbrella of cultural humility. The coaching profession has a responsibility to acknowledge and recognise spirituality. This can be done in conjunction with religion, but also as a separate, equal principle. Incorporating the words 'spirituality' or 'spiritual belief' into the codes of conduct or framework will advance the field, and help to create more spiritually aware and integrated coaches.

The integration of spirituality and spiritual language in the lexicon of coaching is an ever-evolving product of systems change. Such change occurs when professionals in the field become thought leaders due to their passion for the project.

Strengthening the field

Through our research and experience, we have concluded that coaches are increasingly being asked to discuss spiritual themes with clients, and we believe that spiritual coaching has now found its place at the coaching table. Spirituality is a topic that's being discussed more, as clients struggle to find meaning. We are now seeing that spiritual coaching has its own niche within the broader field of coaching. Spirituality can emerge in coaching sessions that are otherwise centred on different aspects of life, such as work and wellness.⁸

In tribute – Dr Kate Anthony

DMN – Defining the difference between counselling and coaching has long been my remit. In 2008, I co-founded the Online Therapy Institute with Dr Kate Anthony. Dr Anthony

was a BACP Fellow and an instrumental thought leader in the field. In 2010, the Online Therapy Institute expanded to include online coaching. Together, Kate and I launched *TILT Magazine* (Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology) and offered educational articles and courses for coaches. In 2012, we wrote an article about the brave new world of online coaching for the launch issue of *Coaching Today*.⁹ From that point, Dr Anthony was instrumental in introducing the concept of online coaching to the BACP Coaching division.

In 2021, Kate and I wrote a book together about online coaching¹⁰, and shortly after, we contributed a second article for *Coaching Today* about the new ethical framework regarding technology and coaching.¹¹ Our synergy continued, and in 2023, we completed our final work together: a chapter about spiritual coaching and the numinous moments that show up within an online coaching session.¹²

Sadly, just before our book was published, Dr Kate Anthony passed away. Kate had every intention of writing an article about spiritual coaching for *Coaching Today*, so with her death, I, (DMN) took that charge, paying forward her legacy.

Dr Madison Leigh Akridge has teamed up with DMN to offer meaningful dialogue and understanding about the rich world of spiritual coaching. We are both honoured to feature Kate's final contribution in our collection of essays, *Case Studies in Spiritual Coaching: A Survey Across Life, Wellness, and Work Domains*. ■

We pay tribute to Dr Anthony on the Online Therapy Institute website at: www.onlinetherapyinstitute.com/kate

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