

HOW TO COACH, GUIDE, AND LEAD THE CONFUSED AND UNCERTAIN PROFESSIONAL

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Counseling Versus Coaching

A. What is the difference between counseling and coaching?

Coaching is about moving an individual forward in their lives. A student or new attorney (*hereafter “client”*) may feel stuck, be in transition, or just cannot seem to get into action month after month. Coaching provides structure and accountability over time. The client has the power to know what is right for them. The coach is the motivating force for their client to hold a space for them to explore options and encourage action steps.

Counseling is providing advice, guidance, and answers to inquiries you either have knowledge about or can figure out quickly. Many counselors who work with legal clients are either former practicing attorneys or have some training or foundation on how to work with legal professionals.

B. When do you switch from counseling to coaching?

As a counselor, you provide a framework to answer the inquiry or the question that your client has. You are the advisor, and your client is seeking your guidance. Despite your best efforts, you may find that your client still seems unfocused and stuck even after you have provided them with advice, structure, tools, and information. There could be many reasons for this. Your client may feel overwhelmed by your advice, may feel uncertain about their choices, or have other issues or concerns that are outside the scope of the counseling sessions.

This is when you can switch from a counseling to a coaching model. What distinguishes coaching from other modalities is that coaching is about working with your client to help them identify and achieve their personal and professional goals. The coach brings curiosity and active listening skills. They ask questions that allow the client space to think, reflect, and come up with their own answers.

C. What is your role as a coach?

As a coach you . . .

- bring active listening skills, curiosity, and intuition.
- self-manage your own agenda and opinions by turning off your *advisor mindset*.
- understand that your client has the power to identify and know what they need.
- use open-ended and powerful questions that are inquisitive.
- help your client brainstorm their values and take ownership over action steps.
- support your client's framework for accountability.

D. What are some coaching techniques you can employ?

1. **Active listening:** give your client your full and undivided attention. What is the client saying? What are they not saying? What is their energy like? You may want to acknowledge or mirror back excitement or trepidation. Restate what your client has said during your session. This may help the client “hear themselves” and clarify their thoughts and feelings. It also helps to make sure you are on the same page and establishes a sense of understanding and rapport with your client. Example: *What I hear you say is [restate].*
2. **Facilitation:** ask follow-up questions that encourage the client to think through their goals and explore what they have not considered. Create space for them to explore their feelings around those issues. As a coach, you are holding space to help your client come up with their own answers. Examples: *Tell me more about What else is on your mind? What steps can you take to? What options do you have? What do you think/feel about that? What can you do about that? What can you do this week or work on later? How does that affect you? How can you go about accomplishing this? How can I support you?*
3. **Acknowledgment/support:** it is important to be encouraging, and express understanding and support for what your client is experiencing in your sessions. The client should feel supported and understood. When your client feels supported, they are open and feel confident in their decision-making process. Examples: *(1) I know this is hard for you and I am so proud of what you have done so far. Please give yourself credit for [eating healthy this week], this is not easy, and you are doing your best; (2) Many people struggle with [finding a career path], and I want you to know that this is not an easy process, but you are taking ownership and I am here to support you; (3) I understand that you have a lot going on right now [in your family], and I am impressed by how you can manage your responsibilities while keeping up with your academics. I admire your focus and determination.*

Help your clients overcome negative feelings and roadblocks:

Since personal growth often cannot be achieved without growing pains, coaches and counselors need to be prepared to help their clients work through the issues as they come up. It is not uncommon for a client to get excited about a goal or a particular opportunity in life, and then quickly stumble upon their insecurities, self-defeating habits, doubts, and other roadblocks and fears that prevent them from taking action steps. The coach holds space for the client to (1) recognize their fears and roadblocks; (2) identify what drives them; (3) challenge negative assumptions; (4) identify goals and envision what they want to achieve; (5) process their feelings and (6) help them shift their perspective from feeling stuck to having options.

When your client is confused, upset, afraid, or angry, do your best to allow them to express their feelings in a way that is safe and comfortable. Once they have expressed their feelings you can help them shift their perspective by brainstorming new possibilities. When they have identified certain goals, they can consider their options and action steps. If they continue to feel stuck, ask open-ended questions like, “What is standing in your way?” It is possible that the goals they set were not realistic or achievable in the time frame allocated. Do they have conflicting goals or issues that need to be resolved before they can move forward? Some open-ended questions you can start with are:

- *What are you feeling right now? What do you need right now? How can I support you? Tell me more...*
- *What makes you feel/think this way? What can you do about that? What would you like to see happen?*
- *Is there another way to ... think about this? ... to achieve your goal? . . . to change the current situation.*
- *What has kept you from doing this in the past? What concerns/challenges do you see around this goal? What can you do differently this time?*

Coaching questions you can use with your clients:

Motivate your client:

- What brought you to law school?
- What type of work environment do you thrive in? What type of environment drains you?
- What personal characteristics or strengths are you most proud of?
- Think about a time you did something well. What were the components of that success? What kind of environment and people were in that place?

When your client feels stuck:

- What are your assumptions?
- Think of a time when you were at your best: what made that possible?
- What are you resisting?
- What are other ways to perceive this issue?

Get your client into action steps within a timeframe:

- If you could take one action step, what would it be?
- What would you like to accomplish in the next . . . ?
- What would you like to do in the next 24/48 hours?
- What would you like to start/complete this year/semester?
- Where do you see yourself when you graduate? 5/10/15 years from now?
- What are the next steps before our next meeting?

Powerful questions:

These questions invite introspection, are open-ended, and cannot be answered with yes or no.

- What do you want?
- What is next?
- How will you start?
- What are some possibilities?
- What are you tolerating?
- What are you not letting go of?
- Where are you being hard on yourself?

Revisit your counseling techniques to help your client achieve their goals:

After you have coached your client and they have identified some options, you can revisit some concrete counseling and advising techniques to help them identify and achieve their goals. This is done through the following techniques:

- **Assessment tools:** Evaluate and determine your client's specific motivations, challenges, needs, and interests.
- **Goal-setting:** Help your client identify short-term (90 days) and long-term goals (what your client wants to achieve). Break each goal into small and manageable steps that can be followed and tracked. One tool is to set S.M.A.R.T. goals: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-limited.
- **Create a compelling and clear vision:** find a source of motivation, connect goals to higher personal missions, and strengthen a sense of commitment to that mission/passion.
- **Create an action plan:** Determine how each goal will be achieved and set a timeline.
- **Keep the focus:** Establish clear metrics, assign homework, check in, keep the client accountable, and celebrate small successes at each phase of the process.
- **Address any issues/blocks:** As they come up.

Example

1. **Identify a SMART Goal:** For example: "Secure a paid summer internship at a small/medium law firm in NYC by April 30th." Example of a goal that is not a SMART Goal: "I need to get a job."
2. **What motivates/excites your client about their goal?** Perhaps it's obtaining professional experience, getting paid, exploring a new practice area, and building professional relationships. What is the consequence of not reaching this goal? Most likely, it's a disappointment, not getting paid, no experience to include on their resume, parents/family will be upset, etc.
3. **Break each SMART goal into small action steps:** What needs to happen? This may include: researching firms with 10-100 attorneys, identifying alumni contacts, seeking

4. out and attending at least three networking events in the next 30 days, identifying family/friends/professional contacts, using LinkedIn to reach out to potential contacts, updating a resume, cover letter, LinkedIn profile, consult a career counselor, create a list of potential firms/contacts and track outreach.
5. **Create an action plan and set weekly and monthly targets:** For example, Mondays, 7-9 pm is the time the client will do their firm research; Tuesdays 7-8 pm is the time to send three emails or LinkedIn requests. Update resume and cover letter by [specific date].
6. **Address your client's fears and blocks:** Help the client break and reframe their negative thoughts and narrative. *"I cannot do this. I am too busy with classes. I have no professional contacts. I will never get a paid job. I don't like networking. It's March and I still don't have a job. All my friends have jobs, why don't I? My grades are not good enough."*

E. Assessment Tools

Some clients may prefer to take a more "measured" and "scientific" approach to figuring out what they are meant to do, in which case, they should consider taking an assessment. These tools may provide insight into strengths and skills that can help them navigate professional opportunities.

- **Myers-Briggs Type Indicator** - is an introspective self-report assessment that indicates differing psychological preferences in how people perceive the world and make decisions.
- **16 Personalities.com** is a free tool. It is an insightful personality test that creates an in-depth picture of one's personality traits, professional potential, and preferences. It can be used for selection, development, and coaching purposes.
- **Self-Directed Search** - measures interests and favorite activities, www.self-directed-search.com
- **Highlands Ability Battery** - measures abilities and aptitudes, www.highlandco.com
- **Hogan Assessments** - measures motives, values & preferences, www.hoganassessments.com
- **The DiSC Sorter**, www.disctests.com, and the Birkman Method, www.birkman.com
- **Gallup Strengths Finder**, the [CliftonStrengths](http://www.cliftonstrengths.com) uncovers your unique order of top strengths.

Other assessment tools to explore:

- www.humanmetrics.com
- <http://keirsev.com>
- <http://careerkey.org>
- <http://careerplanner.com>
- www.kolbe.com
- www.viacharacter.org
- www.enneagraminstitute.com

How do Mental Health Conditions, Mental Roadblocks, and/or Neurodiversity impact how you coach or counsel?

As counselors and administrators, we may be working with clients who are facing mental health challenges, mental roadblocks, and/or are neurodiverse. It is important to have an awareness and a basic understanding of what these issues look like, when these issues come up, and how we respond to them. There are many different types of mental health conditions, mental roadblocks, and/or neurodiverse categories that the general population falls into. This handout does not cover all of them. Instead, we chose some areas that may come up in your counseling and coaching interactions with clients whether they are entering the legal field and/or are seasoned attorneys or law professionals. Some of the coaching topics we covered in this handout are (1) Anxiety and Depression (2) Imposter Syndrome and (3) Attention Deficit Disorder (ADHD). The information provided is not medical or therapeutic advice but techniques and thoughts on how to coach clients.

In a coaching and counseling relationship, your client may voluntarily share sensitive information with you. It is important not to make assumptions about and/or diagnose your clients. These tools are best used when your client has disclosed to you that they are neurodiverse, have a mental health condition, or are experiencing a mental roadblock. Many of our Gen Z clients are “ . . . more open to talking about and seeking help for their mental health. Therapy is less stigmatized, with 37% reporting to the [APA](#) that they have received treatment from a mental health professional.” (see [Gen Z and mental health | therapist.com](#)). The background and questions we outlined below will help you navigate your coaching relationship with your client without needing to have a mental health background.

F. ANXIETY and DEPRESSION

A *2021 Survey of Law Student Well-Being* surveyed law students in 39 law schools across the country. The study found that 69% of law students were facing mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression (see [‘It is Okay to Not Be Okay’: The 2021 Survey of Law Student Well-Being](#)). This percentage was up from a 2014 version of the same study where the student rate was 42%. A 2017 American Bar Association study [The Path to Lawyer Well-Being](#) showed that law students enter law school with higher levels of “life satisfaction” and strong mental health but that deteriorates over the course of law school. The research showed that “ . . . law students are the most dissatisfied, demoralized, and depressed of any graduate student population.” A 2023 Bloomberg Law survey found even higher rates, with “over 75% of student respondents reported increased anxiety because of law school-related issues, and over 50% reported experiencing depression.” (see [Analysis: Well-Being in Law School-Law Students Aren’t Ok](#)). Law graduates suffering from anxiety and depression are entering law practice with higher

rates of anxiety and depression than ever before. The chances that your client is dealing with mental health challenges are incredibly high.

ANXIETY

What is it?

According to the [Mayo Clinic](#), “Anxiety disorder has intense, excessive, and persistent worry and fear about everyday situations.” Anxiety may involve “repeated episodes of sudden feelings . . . fear or terror that reaches a peak within minutes. . . [This] interferes with daily activities, [is] difficult to control, [is] out of proportion to the actual danger, and can last a long time.” Approximately half of all individuals with clinical depression also suffer from anxiety. Anxiety disorders can have both genetic and environmental causes.

Characteristics:

Anxiety may cause one to feel nervous, restless, or tense; have a sense of impending danger, panic, or doom; trouble concentrating or thinking of anything other than the present worry. Other symptoms may include an urge to avoid situations that cause anxiety. Some people experience physical symptoms (e.g, trouble sleeping, difficulty breathing, increased heart rate, feeling weak, tired, and/or experiencing digestive distress).

How does it come up?

Our clients work in environments that are apt to generate anxiety. Most students experience law school as highly competitive. They are expected to think expeditiously and succinctly articulate their arguments. For many, this is the first time their performance will be evaluated in a public setting. In this adversarial context, clients find their endeavors depreciated by their opponents. Law school is a training ground to prepare lawyers for these expectations through the Socratic method, clinical/moot court, and trial practice opportunities. However, these training opportunities in and of themselves are a cause of stress, and many law students struggle with performance anxiety which can stay with them through the start of their careers.

How do we engage?

A person with anxiety is often feeling stuck in a thought pattern and unable to move forward. The key is to empower the person to look to the future, identify and set aside unhelpful beliefs, and set achievable goals. One method is [The Wellness Society, E.A.S.E. Approach](#), and this four-part system encompasses (1) Empowerment, (2) Acceptance, (3) Shifting, and (4) Engagement.

1. **Empowerment:** Your client feels powerless. They feel lost and lack control. Give your client their power back. Acknowledge their success as a law student or young lawyer. Ask about their wins and things they have accomplished that they are proud of. Brainstorm their strongest skill sets. What are they? How do they impact their success?
2. **Acceptance:** Trying to eliminate anxiety can cause more anxiety. It's okay to acknowledge that this anxiety is present. Allow the client to feel what is coming up for

them. You may also allow them to be heard by giving them space to vent or share what they are feeling in the moment without saying much.

3. **Shifting:** When a client is in an anxiety loop, they are stuck in a thought pattern. One way to unstuck them is to connect them to why they came to you in the first place. You may want to ask them: *What is your goal for today? How do your goals align with your values? What do you hope to achieve?* By allowing them to connect to their goals and aspirations you lay the groundwork for taking action steps.
4. **Engagement:** People who feel anxious will do anything to avoid situations that cause them anxiety. Avoidance is not an option for those in a legal environment as it only increases fear from a lack of engagement. You want to help your client identify opportunities to rebuild their confidence and morale. One way is to shift the perspective. What are other ways to look at a problem? Brainstorm other viewpoints with your client.

DEPRESSION

What is it?

Depression is a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness, and loss of interest which can interfere with one's daily functioning. Depression can be temporary, situational, or long-term.

Characteristics:

Depression may present as an absence of joy or happiness, pervasive negative emotions, focusing on the worst-case scenarios, difficulty resting or getting quality sleep, feeling tired, sleepy, or low energy, and possible substance abuse.

How does it come up?

A study from “. . . the [Dave Nee Foundation](#) found that “. . . most law students begin law school with a psychological profile similar to that of the general public, with depression rates at less than 10%. But after just one semester, depression rates rise to 27%, after two semesters, the rate spikes to 34%, and after three years, up to 40% of law students experience depression . . . When broken down by gender, the percentage of those who reported that their well-being “significantly worsened” was higher among students who identify as female (26%) or as nonbinary (38%) than among those respondents who identify as male (22%).” (see [Analysis: Well-Being in Law School-Law Students Aren't Ok](#))

How do we engage?

This can be tricky. How a person experiences depression may impact their engagement and receptiveness in a counseling or coaching environment. Some factors to consider are whether your client is seeing you because they are required to (e.g. academic probation/performance review) or because they want to (e.g. seeking guidance for an opportunity).

A tool to move people out of a fixed mindset is to shift their perspective (see [6 Tips for working with your Coaching Client who has Depression or Anxiety - RecoveryView - Behavioral Health Community](#)).

1. **Meet your client where they are:** Acknowledge how they are feeling at the moment. You want to check your desire to advise and brainstorm ideas that you think are right for them. Take a step back and ask questions to uncover what motivates your client and help them identify action steps.
2. **Identify strengths and skill sets:** What skills and strengths do they have right now that they can deploy to get into action? Brainstorm with your client and have them write it down. Figure out how those skills can help them make choices and decisions.
3. **Envision the flip side of the worst-case scenario:** Your client is probably spending a lot of time in the *worst-case scenario* space and feels trapped and unable to move out of it. Create a space for them to conceptualize things going right for them. What does it feel like? What does it look like? What did they learn from those good moments that can help them shift their perspective on the bad moments they are experiencing?
4. **Coach/Counsel with empathy and compassion:** Your client may not make progress on their goals for some time and may regress. This may trigger negative feelings towards your client or yourself for not doing enough. Have compassion for your client and yourself. Your client is taking steps to receive help and you are there to help them. Sometimes the act of engagement and being heard is the most important piece of a counseling/coaching relationship.

G. IMPOSTER SYNDROME

What is it?

Imposter syndrome (hereafter IS) happens when there is a mismatch between how a client sees themselves as currently being, and who they think they need to be to achieve or create a goal, despite evidence that your client is more than capable. It is important to understand that there are systemic issues in workplaces that stem from institutionalized sexism and racism that create IS for women and minorities. (see [Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome](#)).

Characteristics:

IS allows for self-doubt, risk aversion, undervaluing contributions, attributing success to external factors, sabotaging self-success, setting unrealistic expectations, having a continuous fear of not living up to expectations, and burnout. Feeling like a fraud and/or feeling that “I don’t belong” can also be present.

How does it come up?

Law school is a hyper-competitive environment where students compete for top grades and top jobs. They are less likely to share their feelings of inadequacy with their peers or others.

Lawyers feel the pressure to portray themselves as intelligent problem solvers who are organized and always have all the answers. They seldom admit their failures to their peers or senior partners. This creates internalized fear of failure, second-guessing themselves, comparisons to high-achieving peers, and self-doubt.

How do we engage?

1. **Identify destructive rumination:** There is a negative story your client is telling themselves. These intrusive thoughts can lead your client down the path of missed opportunity, paralyzing fear, and playing it safe by counting themselves out. Ask questions to identify those thoughts and then punch holes in them. “I am hearing . . .” “If they didn’t think you were good enough, they would not have offered you the position.”
2. **They do belong:** A feeling that you do not belong is a big part of IS for law students and new attorneys. Brainstorm with your client what their added value is. This helps to reaffirm to your client that they are smart enough and valuable enough to be there.
3. **Identify the origin story:** IS started somewhere for your client. It could be a result of parental expectations in childhood, a bad work experience, or negativity from personal relationships. It helps to brainstorm where it started and how that experience does not connect to experiences moving forward. Sometimes clients do not even realize they are carrying negativity from other experiences into their future thoughts and actions.
4. **Build a support network:** The most destructive part of IS is the mental narrative. The more you tell yourself something, the more it becomes real. Many times IS is a person's dirty little secret. Your client isn’t voicing the IS to others. Having a support system of trusted advisors (e.g. family, friends, therapists, coaches) so that your clients can share their negative thoughts can weaken the IS narrative. For example, if your client’s mental narrative is “You are stupid.” What will their best friend say to them when they say this out loud? Help your client create a list of trusted advisors they can reach out to when they need support.

H. ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER (ADHD)

What is it?

According to the Mayo Clinic, “Adult attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a mental health disorder that includes a combination of persistent problems, such as difficulty paying attention, hyperactivity and impulsive behavior. Adult ADHD can lead to unstable relationships, poor work or school performance, low self-esteem, and other problems.”

Characteristics:

Inattentiveness, impulsivity, and emotional dysregulation are common traits. Other traits are low tolerance for boredom, disorganization, and poor time management skills. Some strengths are excelling in areas of interest, creativity, being an idea generator, and having the ability to

hyperfocus. One can present as hyperactive or inattentive (can't pay attention to details, trouble following instructions and conversations).

How does it come up?

Clients with ADHD do their best work when the topic is of interest to them. If your client is passionate about the practice area they have chosen they may hyperfocus on their work. They may put in long hours or investigate all aspects of a case. On the other hand, if the client lacks interest they may fall behind in their work, be late to meetings and just have a hard time staying on task. The other piece is disorganization, losing or forgetting things, and starting projects but not finishing them.

How do we engage?

1. **Organization:** Your clients may be coming to you for advice and guidance on a topic they may not be excited about (e.g. job search, performance). Instead of advising them on the steps to achieving their end goal, have them brainstorm what they are willing to do and what they are not willing to do. Then guide them to identify a realistic structure that will help them achieve their goals. The key is to help them hone in on what is motivating for them (see #2).
2. **Explore interests:** People with ADHD tend to be motivated by things that interest them. Explore what is exciting or interesting to them about the topic they have brought to you. What are some strengths around those interests? What items can they get into action steps with? How does this connect to their short-term and long-term goals?
3. **Identify what is getting in the way:** Many times a client may feel stuck because they don't know what their roadblocks are. Getting your client to talk about what is standing in their way can help them move into action steps. Once they have identified those roadblocks, (e.g. how do they feel about them? What do they want to do about them?), recognition can be a catalyst for movement.
4. **Accountability:** Explore what works for them to be accountable. Do they need to build in structural support for themselves (e.g. calendar system, online time management tools)? Brainstorm whether it would be helpful for them to have an accountability network (e.g. accountability partner, mentors, regular check-ins with a coach/counselor).

I. RESOURCES

Legal Education Needs a Wellness Reckoning, [Legal Education Needs a Wellness Reckoning \(bloomberglaw.com\)](https://www.bloomberglaw.com)

The National Task Force of Lawyer Well-Being, [ThePathToLawyerWellBeingReportRevFINAL.pdf \(americanbar.org\)](https://www.americanbar.org)

Lawyer Well-Being & Mental Health: Massachusetts LAP Blog, [The Full Weight of Law School: Stress on Law Students is Different - Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers | MA \(lclma.org\)](https://www.lclma.org)

It is Okay to Not be Okay, The 2021 Survey of Lawyer Well Being, ['It is Okay to Not Be Okay': The 2021 Survey of Law Student Well-Being by David Jaffe, Katherine Bender, Jerome M. Organ :: SSRN](https://ssrn.com)

Gen Z Students Want Better Health Care Access on Campus, [Gen Z students want better mental health care access on-campus - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](https://www.latimes.com)

Gen Z and Mental Health, [Gen Z and mental health | therapist.com](https://therapist.com)