

● **Patrick Williams**, Ed.D, therapist and coach, presents an innovative, holistic approach to an old conundrum. He goes ...

Beyond the 12th Step: Life Coaching after Addiction Counseling

The focus of addiction counseling has always been to keep the client clean and sober, and restore some sense of functionality. It is about preventing relapse and providing a place of structure and safety to protect the person's sobriety. In this context, the 12-Step Program has literally saved countless thousands of lives. Its contribution to the therapy of addictive clients is immeasurable.

But what happens after the twelfth step? Is there life beyond merely a static place of sober functioning? I posit that life coaching can take the addictive personality beyond the twelfth step, into a future place of gratifying productiveness — the reality of achieved goals and successes that would ordinarily remain unmet.

Unachieved goals and unrealized potential are an unaddressed threat to the addictive client's sober future. They keep him or her locked into an endless cycle of running “no-destination laps” on the “need-to-stay-sober treadmill.” Life coaching can break this unproductive cycle and steer the client towards a place of realized dreams, where the focus is on the wonderful possible future, instead of the destructive past.

Take the story of a woman currently addicted to 12-Step Programs. For 20 years she has joined and rejoined twelve-step, self-help groups, always thinking of and keeping herself in a “broken” mode. For this kind of person, there is no “post-addiction” victory. Life becomes a broken record, caught endlessly in the loop of therapy and self-help programs, never realizing what lies beyond addiction. Life is consumed with the need merely to maintain, never to reach and achieve. The fear of

falling off the wagon sometimes keeps the wagon from going anywhere new, exciting and fulfilling or moving into the future of possibility — beyond the twelfth step.

As a therapist turned coach, I believe the therapist's work is critical for recovery. But this work focuses necessarily on relapse prevention — working through pain and past reasons for the addiction; holding the client accountable; anticipating and dealing with myriad problems that occur in every addictive person's recovery; charting and overseeing the desired course of treatment to ensure a functional life despite the addiction. Treated as a diagnosable illness with medical and clinical models, addiction looks at the past in order to gain some functioning present. Instead of replacing or modifying this kind of therapy, I suggest that it be complemented and completed through life coaching.

“ Life coaching treats
the whole person. ”

Psychotherapy generally deals with emotional and behavioral problems and disruptive situations — such as addictions — and seeks to bring the client to normal function by focusing on his dysfunction. This context can keep the person in constant recovery, which unconsciously imposes a limit on discovering and creating a fulfilling, purposeful life. In contrast, life coaching generally deals with functional

persons who want to move beyond addiction to achieve excellence while creating an extraordinary life. Coaching is a process similar to solution-focused techniques that many therapists use for less serious psycho-emotional problems and life stresses, yet goes beyond just problem solving by *creating* instead of *fixing*.

The basic philosophy behind life coaching is that humans have immeasurable resources of energy, wisdom, ability and genius waiting to be set in motion. Coaching can help us create the life we want more efficiently by tapping into our resources to facilitate change and realize our potential. Life coaching treats the whole person, not the dysfunction. It focuses on helping people who already have a “measure of success” in their lives — sobriety and a stabilized place of safety — but who want to bridge the gap between where they are and where they want to be in their professional and personal life. With coaching, this safe place becomes a place of expectation and amazing potential, instead of mere functioning.

A life coach is much like a trainer who helps an athlete win the “gold medal” instead of just being in the race. Life coaches help their clients design the life they want, bring out their clients’ own brilliance and resources so that they can achieve excellence and create purposeful, extraordinary lives.

We believe the most powerful therapy on earth is to empower a person by showing him his strengths instead of his weaknesses. This logical and most healing move beyond the twelfth step of addiction therapy can improve dramatically the addictive client’s overall mental health and life. Coaching answers the question “now what?” that every addictive client asks when reaching that twelfth step.

It is necessary for the addicted client to move along the 12-step path with the kind of care, guidance and accountability provided by a trained therapist. Each step is designed to realize another measure of success until, ultimately, sustained sobriety is achieved. Most often, this path to restored functionality takes years, and these clients are not the best candidates for life coaching; there is too much other work to do. But somewhere along this path the client must look beyond that twelfth step, and find a road to continued success and realized potential for the future. Eventually, the substance-free person can work with a coach to co-create the life he or she really wants — not just a fragilely balanced life.

Addictive therapy sessions explore the reasons behind addiction in order to understand what may have caused it. What holes were drugs or alcohol filling? While therapy can help the patient understand the reasons, it may not always help him find ways to move past the holes, or better yet, to fill them in.

Therapy focuses on the inner world of the addict, but does not necessarily translate into the outer dynamics and his future potential. Contrast therapy and coaching in this way: You are driving down the freeway;

looking in your rear-view mirror you see the stretch of road just negotiated filled with the boulders of disappointment and the potholes of missed opportunities. Looking ahead, you see the endless horizon of possibilities waiting to be explored. The backward glance is therapy: seeing clearly what has been experienced, analyzing the reasons and regaining a foothold. The forward view is coaching: working actively with the conscious mind to facilitate the client’s stepping into a preferred future, while living a fulfilling life in the present.

When is the addictive patient in therapy ready for the life-coaching step? Every patient presents unique and individual needs for a personalized therapy program, and every potential life-coaching client likewise is ready for this coaching step at different places along the path of therapy. The trained therapist is best able to determine the moment in recovery when life coaching can either supplement the 12-step process or move the patient beyond it. Understanding the major differences between therapy and coaching is helpful in determining which combination of these practices is suitable to particular clients. There are three broad categories that offer distinctions between therapy and coaching:

- Therapy focuses on the past; coaching looks to the future — perspectives on the process of healing.
- Therapy seeks to “fix” the patient, coaching aims to co-create with the client, which is why the person seeks it out in the first place.
- The therapist is the expert who holds the answers and can fix the problem. The coach partners with the client to support his growth and co-create a better life with him — a contrast between the professional and the collegial relationship.

Therapy deals with the patient’s past and how it applies to his present. The therapist works to bring the client to an adequate and reasonable level of functioning, given the addiction. In contrast, the coach works with an already adequately functioning individual — the addiction is under control, a state of sobriety prevails — to move him or her to a more satisfying level of functionality. Traditional psychotherapy focuses on the root of the problem, the history — the “everything” of origin; coaching focuses on barrier identification, goal setting, planning and creative action to achieve a healthy future.

“Coaching is **not about fixing**; it’s about creating.”

In the clinical therapy practice, the client presents a problem: in this case, an addiction. He or she has come to you to “fix” the problem. In your therapy model for this client, you undertake all the strategies you have been trained to use in the process of healing, including patient

diagnosis and treatment plans. All of these strategies are aimed at fixing the existing problem. The client's perspective in all of this is that you will fix him. Coaching, however, is not about fixing; it's about creating. There is no need for a diagnostic label or even a treatment plan. The assumption in life coaching, for both the client and the coach, is that by working together the client will have greater success in planning, setting goals, and creating a healthy lifestyle. The therapist facilitates the fixing, and the coach facilitates the progress to a fulfilling life beyond the addiction.

During the initial treatment stages of addiction therapy, the therapist is the professional — the expert who fixes the problem. This power differential is difficult to overcome in any coaching relationship, since the power, from the client's perspective, rests with the therapist. While therapy sessions may quite often be intense and sometimes even difficult, the coaching relationship is more on an equal footing. A life coach makes a conscious effort to keep the coaching relationship balanced — an active partnership.

Coaches recognize that their clients have the knowledge and the solutions; the coach simply helps unlock the clients' own brilliance. Coaching sessions are typically open, often friendly, casual and even light. At appropriate times, the coach may even feel comfortable sharing personal experiences that are pertinent to what the client is experiencing. Typically, clients and coaches come to feel they really know each other on a deeper level than is common in most other professional relationships.

Should the therapist also don the coaching hat? Often, the answer to this question is no! Generally, a therapist separates his or her therapy practice from any coaching practice. However, it is true that some therapists have been trained as coaches, and practice coaching techniques with many of their therapy clients. And many therapists have actually transitioned very successfully into full-time coaching.

For therapists who are also coaches and practice active therapy with their clients, it is possible to move into a coaching phase with the addictive client, as long as there is a ritual ending to the therapy relationship, and coaching is begun formally and clearly. It is still best, however, for therapists to refer clients to life coaches when they have resolved their therapeutic issues and are ready to move forward with their life plans.

“The therapist is the expert; the coach is your partner.”

Most therapists agree that to avoid a relapse, something must replace the addictive substance or situation. For those who have spent many years in and out of addictive situations, the addictions themselves create a lifestyle that is difficult to change. Often, a void is left in that person's life that needs filling. Life coaching can help the client breach this gap with productive alternatives that may quite possibly allow her or him to reach previously unattained potentials.

A transition occurs in the client's life when moving from therapy to coaching. Therapy is centered in psychoanalytic styles, pathology, process, history and the exploration of the inner world. It focuses on solutions for specific “problems.” As the client transitions to coaching, he begins to experience a broad focus on his whole person, not just the addiction. The orientation is on outcomes and action, moving from the inner world of therapy to the outer realities and possibilities of life.

In therapy, the vision is limited to a specific set of circumstances that have created something “bad” in the person's life. In coaching, an unlimited vision opens up, filled with promise — the opportunity and ability to achieve dreams, leaving behind the limitations of the past. The therapist asks “why?” The coach asks “how?” The post-addictive client moves from being patient to partner with the possibility of a bright and attainable future. The gap is breached! ●

What's Next?

The advent of coaching has changed the post-addiction outlook for those who have reached sobriety and are looking to create lives of fulfillment and promise beyond the plateau of maintenance. If you are a therapist, you have considerable options in exploring the possibilities of using life coaching for your patients. Some therapists have moved out of the therapy profession altogether into full-time life coaching. Their formal training and education as therapists make them coaches with unique skills and background, able to co-create productive lives with their clients, as well as experience fulfillment in supporting others to live their dreams.

For others, investigating the resources available in professional life coaching, and learning how to determine the appropriate time for the transition of their patients from therapy to coaching with another professional, can be an invaluable asset to their addictive patients. However you choose to incorporate life coaching into your therapy practice, this option is the logical next step for your addictive patients. It will take them beyond the twelfth step into a life of new and continuing successes.

Patrick Williams, Ph.D., MCC, is co-author, with Deborah C. Davis, of *Therapist as Life Coach: Transforming Your Practice* (W.W. Norton & Company).