

Let's Talk...About Mental Health and Mental Illness

Verity Symcox

In one of my first team coaching workshops, I was pulled aside by the CEO moments before I was about to begin and made privy to a very sensitive piece of information; a member of the board of directors, who was part of this team workshop, had just returned to work after having a very public breakdown. I was not prepared. Should I continue as planned? Should I adapt the workshop now? Should I stop and leave? Did everyone know? Should I acknowledge this? In my head, the list of rhetorical questions went on and on...I decided to continue, mindful of this new information.

That event sparked my interest in mental health and just recently, I set out to research mental health in coaching practice. I discovered that I am not alone in my experiences of mental health.

Almost all of the coaches I interviewed believed they had encountered mental illness within a coaching agreement, and **just over half** had knowingly coached a client suffering from a mental illness. Exactly **half** of coaches interviewed had actively undertaken additional mental health training to better support clients. **One hundred percent** of coaches interviewed were credentialed with a professional body and familiar with industry standards, ethics and guidelines (ICF, EMCC, AC).

What the professional bodies say...

Coaching professional bodies and the recent ICF practice guidelines "[Referring a Client to Therapy](#)" by Alicia Hullinger and Joel DiGirolamo, stipulate mental health as the boundary between coaching practice and therapy, and therefore coaches should refer clients suffering from mental illness to therapy. This suggests that coaching is for functioning, mentally healthy clients and only these clients can engage in the coaching process.

Yes, this boundary recognizes that coaches are not mental health professionals and remedial work is better suited to therapeutic interventions, but it assumes that coaches know enough about mental health to uphold this boundary and make appropriate referrals.

So, if coaches are typically untrained in mental health, how do coaches know if a client is mentally ill?

My research showed that coaches don't necessarily know if a client is mentally ill. Coaches instead focus on ensuring coaching remains the most appropriate intervention for the client at this time. Participant coaches disclosed that they did this because they recognized that not only are they typically untrained in mental health, the symptoms of mental illness are too similar to many of the regular, acceptable challenges clients bring to coaching.

Let's talk statistics for a moment...

Globally, the World Health Organization [estimates](#) that **one in four** people suffer with mental illness. Of particular prevalence are depression and anxiety disorders. Worryingly, figures of mental illness are understood to be incredibly inaccurate due to the stigma surrounding mental health. While there

are many social and organizational initiatives seeking to remove this stigma and improve mental well-being, organizational mental health presenteeism is prevalent and an enormous economic challenge. What's more, stress and unhealthy workplaces significantly increase the likelihood of developing a mental illness.

Over the last 20 years, there have been several calls for coaches to acknowledge mental health. In 2002, Steven Berglas [identified the organizational damage](#) of coaching if the psychological issues of leaders aren't attended to. In 2009, Diane Coutu and Carol Kauffmann [discovered coaches are frequently hired](#) to coach personal issues beyond the professional context. Anthony Grant, Linley Curtayne and Geraldine Burton [proposed](#) that between 25% and 50% of all coaching clients have clinically significant levels of stress, anxiety and depression.

What does this mean to coaching?

The coaches interviewed considered mental health and mental illness a real, practical issue facing the coaching industry. My research suggests that many coaches are actively seeking a deeper understanding of mental health in coaching practice and want practical support in knowing how to appropriately respond. Coaches identified that mental illness isn't ***always*** beyond the boundary of coaching.

What can you do as a coach?

Think about how you would support a client whose mental health declined during coaching; how would you explore any concerns you had with them? If needed, who or where would you refer the client to? Would you continue to support your client? And if so, how?

My final thoughts...

I believe that coaching can feel therapeutic and does improve well-being, but the concept of mental health within coaching practice is incredibly complex. More research is needed to fully understand mental health in coaching.

[This article](#) was first published on ICF Coaching World.

Verity Symcox is a Coach and Behavioral Change Specialist with a passion for understanding and researching mental health within coaching practice. Verity has a background in counseling studies (CPCAB) and a MSc in Coaching and Behavioral Change from Henley Business School, UK. Verity began coaching in 2012, becoming a qualified Hermann Brain Dominance Practitioner (HBDI). She is also a certified NLP practitioner. Before coaching, Verity ran a successful retail business winning her several regional business awards where she was avid about promoting entrepreneurship and SME business growth. Verity's passion for exploring mental health within coaching practice comes from numerous coaching experiences that have shaped her career and her desire to ensure coaching practice meets the needs of all clients, in which promoting mental wellness is integral to the natural coaching process.

