

Comparing Life Coaching and Gestalt Therapy

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I searched for coaching training for four years before I found and enrolled in CDPCC in September, 2012, at the Gestalt International Study Center. Why did I choose this program?

- 1) Because it was offered at GISC, a study center established by my respected colleagues the late Ed Nevis, OD specialist and Gestalt therapy pioneer and his wife, renowned Gestalt therapist, trainer and writer Sonia Nevis. Their high standards meant to me that whatever is offered at the Center will be of excellent quality.
- 2) The CDPCC is grounded in the Cape Cod Model of Gestalt therapy and was thus a method that would mesh with my own Gestalt therapy training and practice, and my evolving ways of thinking about how human beings function and how to support them in growth and change.
- 3) The CDPCC course is structured with sufficient amount of face-to-face study and coaching practice to make deep and complex learning possible for me, while not taking me away from my private practice in New York City too many days at a time.
- 4) And also, importantly for me, I was drawn to this program because of some elements which it distinctly lacked and which I found to be dominant in many other training courses: a) the faculty is excellent without being in any way grandiose; they are hardworking, intellectually generous, and down to earth in their self-presentations, yet do not establish themselves as gurus nor do they demand confluence; b) the program is humanistically hopeful without leaning into spiritualism. These are both very important elements to me.

Theoretical and practical comparisons

What are some of the differences and similarities between Gestalt therapy and CDPCC, a coaching method founded upon some Gestalt therapy practices and ideas? In this paper, I will try to explore the question.

Coaching, a contemporary profession aiming at helping people, largely around success in work matters, emerged from the practices and their related vocabularies in the fields of business, organizational psychology, advertising, motivational speaking, sports, performance, and new age spirituality.

(It is founded, too, on a kind of inchoate recognition of the power of a coach's personal charisma [an aspect of personality functioning] in relation to his/her ability to reassure, impress and inspire the client. This relational aspect is not as yet discussed in the coaching literature; yet it may account for a large part of the success of various training programs and coaching engagements, irrespective of their "philosophical" mix, as drawn from the list above.)

Significant, too, is the fit between coach and coaching client; and the same may be said of the fit between therapist and patient. Fit includes these personal elements: formal education, cultural and familial backgrounds, kinds of study and training, work experiences, significant teachers and mentors, sets of personal values, physiologic rhythms and confidence. In coaching, the good-enough fit allows the coaching client and the coach to "hear" each other with less need to interrupt the pace for "translation".

In Life Coaching importance is placed upon goal setting, measuring, being accountable, and making and fulfilling oral contracts developed by coach and client which state the work that is to be accomplished in the coaching engagement. The client is responsible for articulating and fulfilling his or her goals, as well as for mastering skills needed to achieve those goals, and for modifying goals when constraints in the work/life context make that necessary (not unlike Gestalt therapy's

attention to “opportunities and constraints in the field”). The coach’s role is to assist and support the coaching client in accomplishing these tasks.

In contrast, in the practice of Gestalt therapy, figures of interest (which at times may be goals) organically emerge, co-created in the patient/therapist’s field. What actions these streams of exploration may call forth can be explored, planned around and undertaken by the patient, with support from the therapist. It is in the undertaking of these actions that Gestalt therapy and Life Coaching appear most alike.

In coaching, almost all explorations are aimed toward something denominated as *success*, principally in the world of work or career, and sometimes in interpersonal matters, which are often called *balancing life and work*. Other linguistic keys to understanding the thrust of coaching are words like *accomplishing*, *leading*, *transforming*, as well as *excellence* and *mastery*, which appear over and over in coaching literature.

By contrast, Gestalt therapy is improvisatory in approach, allowing themes of interest to emerge in the awaredly attended to relationship of therapist and patient. Process - interactive patterns of relating and knowing (how) - is as much attended to as content (what). Linguistically, we hear words like *field*, *self*, *figure/ground*, *contact*, *awareness*, *organismic self regulation* often in Gestalt therapy literature. In Life Coaching aspects of “how” are also discussed, yet always with the goal of smoothing the path toward a specific goal. In that last detail, Life Coaching and Gestalt therapy diverge.

Some coaching literature declares that Life Coaching is goal-driven or performance-driven: “Analyze, Strategize, Actualize”, as one writer exhorts. Some articles often declare that, by contrast, psychotherapy is problem-driven. As I see it, that is not true of Gestalt therapy. Rather than being driven, in Gestalt therapy practice we are drawn forward by experiences in the therapeutic moment. I

recognize that I am using a metaphor here, one which seems to me to evoke the flavor of a contemporary Gestalt therapy session.

In Life Coaching there is the question of what to focus upon in the work. This is decided upon during the forming of a coaching contract between client and coach. It is expected that the coach will take the coaching client at face value, believing what he or she says she/he wants to accomplish. As compared with Gestalt therapy, there is little search for subtext. In this regard, training at CDPCC is more subtle, and does teach coaches to “manage the shadow side” and to look for gestural or tonal details which may shed light on the deeper meanings of content being discussed.

A subtle point of difference between Life Coaching and Gestalt therapy is awareness of *field*. In Gestalt therapy, *field* is an indispensable aspect for understanding the patient and her/his needs and desires. It is true that the CDPCC course moves close to this in teaching about the *context* within which efforts towards success will be strategized for and accomplished. The subtle difference is in the over-and-against sense of self vs. context or the sense of self-arising-from-context (essentially a one-person approach) as compared with the interflowing, dynamic intercreating of *organism/environment field* (a multi-person approach).

Concrete Differences between Life Coaching and Gestalt Therapy

There are a number of practical differences between Life Coaching and Gestalt therapy which include

- 1) In the United States, licensure is established individually by each state. To be a psychotherapist, most states require a prescribed kind of training, attaining of a graduate degree, ongoing gathering of CEUs, passing state-administered exams, purchase of professional liability insurance. Right now, though, there is no licensure for Life Coaches in the United States.
- 2) At this time, fees paid for Life Coaching services are most commonly charged by

the project, whereas for Gestalt therapy they are charged by the hour. Fees for Life Coaching are usually much higher than for Gestalt therapy, although that is changing.

3) Medical insurance may cover Gestalt therapy sessions; it does not cover Life Coaching. However, some corporations and non-profits may pay for employees to have Life Coaching, although more usually they will pay for business or transition coaching. This third party payer is called the sponsor.

4) Questions of confidentiality figure in both Gestalt therapy and Life Coaching. It is taken for granted that a therapist's case notes are confidential, yet there are exceptions with regard to legal testimony and reports to HMOs. A reputable Life Coach also includes the mention of confidentiality in her/his initial contract with a client. Yet, where there is a sponsor paying for the sessions, there may be pressure, or even a prior contract, which demands disclosure.

5) Gestalt therapy is most often conducted in the therapist's office at regular, agreed upon intervals, and for specific lengths of meeting time. Life Coaching may take place in an office, in a coffee shop, on a bench park, in the client's place of work, or via telephone or Skype. It may occur on an as-needed basis, is shorter in overall duration, and can then be recontracted for as needed.

6) Psychotherapy training, including professional Gestalt therapy training is several years long, and includes years of supervised practice and study. At this time, professional Life Coaching training is a few months in duration, with some "programs" being only a few hours in length! There is no requirement for ongoing professional supervision.

7) Respect for showing the efficacy of Gestalt therapy theory and practice via research is growing, with at least two new digital journals on Gestalt therapy research, and an international conference, to be held at GISC in April, 2013. As of yet, there is no move toward conducting research in Life Coaching.

Conclusion

To repeat a point which I made earlier, Life Coaching focuses primarily on work and career, or on aspects of life - relationships, personal values, health, self-fulfillment - which importantly support movement toward career advancement, or support retirement from career into a new period of life-stage-appropriate ambition.

Gestalt therapy is more open-ended than Life Coaching, promoting interest in any aspect of life and self which may evolve from the therapeutic encounter via creative adjusting, with an underlying belief that most effective change occurs spontaneously. That description is essentially a right brain-dominated process. I have found the training in CDPCC to be importantly initiated from left brain strengths, with an added effort at teaching trainees how to integrate the two for a complete enough engagement with the client and a movement toward his/her success.

The field of Life Coaching is growing rapidly, while psychotherapy, including individual Gestalt therapy, is shrinking. Numbers of patients have decreased by 30% in the past ten years.

These days, people seek out Life Coaching. They do not want to be portrayed as ill, but rather as well and approaching a specific question to find specific answers. They want to be able to come and go out of the coaching process without seeming remise. They want to have the convenience of consulting by phone or Skype. They want to feel like an expert with regard to their own lives. In this postmodern world, where expertise is often crowd-sourced, they want to regard themselves as the “deciders” in their own lives. Life Coaching supports that.

People want and need mentoring, yet they want it in a new way called Life Coaching. It's my wish to continue my two decades-long career assisting people to move forward in living. Toward that end, I am happy to have attained my Life Coaching certification through training in CDPCC at the Gestalt International Study Center.