

Embracing imperfection: the coach as client

Roxana Bacian draws on her own experience as a therapy client to consider how this can inform and enrich her coaching practice

A primary concern that has traditionally dominated the coaching industry has been an effort to understand and articulate its differentiation from psychotherapy. In the 1990s, the two disciplines were distinguished by hints that therapy deals solely with 'the past', while coaching focuses primarily on 'the future'. This debate has since progressed and today, therapeutic coaching is an established, albeit evolving, service offering – evidenced, in part, by the creation of BACP's Coaching division in 2011, and the establishment of the MSc in integrative counselling and coaching, the first of its kind, at the University of East London (UEL) in 2015.

I joined the coaching profession in 2019, when I had already been a client of psychotherapy for four years. I've since attempted to understand how my experience of psychotherapy influences my practice as a coach. Here, I write specifically from the perspective of the client, drawing on the work of practitioners who have explored the boundaries between therapy and coaching. I discuss how I believe that being a psychotherapy client has made me a more reflective and responsible coach, revealing three principles for ethical practice, informed by BACP's *Ethical Framework*.¹

I structure this article into three main sections, shaped by the lessons I've drawn from psychotherapy: *Respect the Blockers*, *Question your Listening* and *Build your Character*. My learning has emerged primarily from the intensive work I have undertaken with my current therapist of five years. Our partnership inspires in me a deep call to integrity and perseverance. Each lesson is brought to life in a coaching context through direct input from a current coaching client, with his permission, and I am grateful to him for articulating and sharing his reflections towards this aim.

Principle 1: Respect the blockers

My current client, 'Ravi', is a leader in the UK's social impact sector, and at the time of writing, we have completed three coaching sessions together over the last three months. In our first coaching session, Ravi shared that he struggled with perfectionism, which led him to work late into the night, and left him too exhausted the following day to be present for his team.

When he shared this with me, I found myself asking him about his motivation – what kept him working? To this, Ravi responded honestly: to be validated by his colleagues. I suggested that we all need validation sometimes. At this point in our session, I experienced a palpable change in Ravi's demeanour: he became thoughtful, serious and deeply engaged. My interventions were well received and they pushed the work forward; yet, I remained concerned about whether I had been too hasty. I worried about having inquired about Ravi's motivation and the potential reflection process that could kickstart inside him. This worry was influenced by my own experience of therapeutic work at depth, which I had often found destabilising. Over the years, this work has enabled me to make significant changes in my behaviour but has also put a significant strain on my nervous system, taking the form of recurrent crying bouts, migraines and extreme fatigue.

To minimise this destabilisation, my therapist would often invite me to befriend my limiting patterns and rather than force change, allow myself to be where I was. For instance, she would invite me not to 'change' my perfectionism, but to simply acknowledge it. In the moment, it felt frustrating to me to state the obvious. It also felt as if I was resigned to being this way forever. Yet, over the following weeks and months, I noticed how my gradual acceptance of myself helped me to release the sticky grip of perfectionism.² Instead, I noticed I was slowly developing an increased tolerance for minor mistakes, such as missing the bus or making a typo in a blog post.

Beyond their limitations, enduring patterns of behaviour have a proven psychological function.³ Understanding these is often a slow, contextual process. For example, Ravi was convinced that communication was a critical improvement area for him. I invited him to rate his performance on communicating during a presentation on a scale of 1 to 10, and alongside this, to also invite scores from a colleague over time. This helped him to realise not only that he was being overly critical of himself, but also helped him recognise the additional factors that led him to feeling unable to communicate. When he felt confident about his work, he described having '*a much easier time*'.

Coaching has given us an immense gift in inviting us to 'think big', to want more from our lives and to take the actions that enable us to truly live the lives of our dreams.

It has also sometimes led me, as a coach – certainly in the early years of my practice – to 'push' for goal attainment as proof that I was a

'good coach', and that my work had legitimacy. And yet, over the course of our lives, many of us are asked to accept a different reality: that we may spend many years overcoming limiting patterns and behaviours that frustratingly hold us back from our better lives.

Through my personal experience of psychotherapy, I now see incremental behaviour shifts as an incredible human achievement: that within the constraints of our respective lives, we may come to recognise our patterns, and then employ our imagination and memory to craft new ways of responding to the world. The question that remains for me is: *how do we know that we are meeting our clients where they are?*

Principle 2: Question your listening

It's in those moments when clients bring their real-world challenges that we understand, on an embodied level, that what we're listening to – and the way we listen to it – matters. Most practitioners will remember powerful listening moments: the long silences that led to tears, the struggle that was shared for the first time, the pattern that had been weighing heavily for years. Listening in the helping professions is an active intervention rather than a passive one.⁴ This aligns with a relational approach to the helping relationship, where the practitioner isn't a blank slate or sounding board but an equal partner in the relationship and the meaning that is created within it. Furthermore, ample research has shown over the last decade that the quality of the coaching partnership is the main instrument of positive outcomes in both therapy and coaching.⁵

When I reflect on the intervention with Ravi I described earlier, I notice my listening is geared towards two aims: first, for my client to experience an increased sense of agency; and second, for him to acquire a stronger belief in himself. These inclinations emerge from my own therapeutic journey and are illustrated in my interventions: enquiring about motivation to encourage ownership of the situation; and providing reassurance so my client's relationship with his behaviour becomes less self-punitive and emerges more from a stance of curiosity.

Bringing awareness to our listening helps us to not only gain a better understanding of ourselves, but also a better understanding of our clients. We are then more able to notice non-verbal cues, or things mentioned casually in passing, which might hint at deeper issues. In the example of my work with Ravi, I would gently pick up on and name these subconscious moments of self-criticism, enabling him to raise his awareness and think more deeply about them and hopefully, over time, reduce their frequency.

However, experiences of misaligned or fuzzy intentions still occur. I also recall examples in my practice where similar interventions have led to less positive outcomes for the client, where I have been met with defensiveness or resistance. Psychological boundaries can slip through the fingers of even the most astute practitioners.⁶ That's precisely why it is crucial

to notice when this happens and bring it into our awareness. In my work with Ravi, this involves paying close attention to my tendency to over-empathise, which in turn leads me to over-identify with him, and I am in danger of projecting my own needs onto him. Coaching from an 'empath' position also leaves my nervous system firing for at least 24 hours after a session: an area of further development for me as I continue to understand this pattern in myself, as both client and coach.

Talking and listening in the helping professions do not have the casual quality they have in day-to-day life. After many therapy or coaching sessions, our nervous system will continue to feel into the process – it will hold onto what was listened to or not, what was voiced or left unshared.⁷ As clients, we will recall the minutiae of our therapist's or coach's facial expression, choice of words and body language.⁸ Everyday social interactions are highly amplified in the coaching and therapy session. *What then, if anything, might we need to change about how we listen and talk as coaches?*

Principle 3: Build your character

In recalibrating our relationship to listening, we recalibrate our relationship to change.

Clients often come into coaching and therapy with one idea of what needs to change, only to emerge at the end of the process with a different set of outcomes. As a coach trainee, I often struggled to reconcile the deceptively neat structure of the GROW coaching model⁹ I was trained in with the 'unruliness' of real-world goal-setting.

When it comes to coaching interventions that have the potential to kickstart significant shifts in clients, I find philosopher Laurie Paul's description of 'transformative experiences' especially useful: *'There is no way to know in advance what it will be like once you've transformed, but it will be like seeing with different eyes... A transformative experience is one that alters what it's like to be you.'*¹⁰ To me, this speaks to the disorientation inherent in the process of change. In my journey with therapy, I continue to be surprised and humbled both by the intricacy of my behaviours and my power to influence them.

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In the case of Ravi, he began by talking about addressing his perfectionism, as well as increasing confidence in his communication and taking charge of his schedule and time-keeping. As he later shared with me: *'One of the most surprising aspects of the process of change has been how non-linear it is. Before starting coaching, I assumed that progress would feel steady and measurable – set a goal, take consistent action, and see continuous improvement. In reality, change has involved setbacks, plateaus, and moments of doubt, even while overall progress was being made.'*

A clear example of this was working on improving consistency in a specific behaviour (e.g., maintaining a regular routine or following through on commitments). Initially, Ravi experienced strong motivation and made noticeable progress for a few weeks. Then, unexpectedly, old habits resurfaced, and consistency dropped. To Ravi, this felt like failure at first. However, through coaching, it became clear that this regression was part of the process, rather than a sign that change wasn't happening. By reflecting on what triggered the setback and adjusting strategies, his behaviour became more sustainable over time.

For Ravi, this experience shifted both his mindset and his emotional response: instead of viewing setbacks as failure, they became useful feedback. The process of change has become less about perfection and more about learning, adapting and continuing to move forward, despite fluctuations.

My client's reflections capture the perseverance and adaptability necessary for developmental work, and I am inspired by his commitment to growth. It arouses a question in me: *how much of this work is about the outcomes we achieve by the end, and how much about the person we will have become in the process?*

When I reflect back on how my therapist supported me to shift unhelpful behaviours, I don't remember tools and techniques – I remember *character*. I changed in therapy not because my therapist asked me to change but because I felt *inspired* to. Because I experienced her as someone who would always choose the harder path, I wanted to do the same. As coaches, our character seeps into our coaching sessions, whether we want it to or not. *Who are our clients meeting and what do we inspire in them?*

In supporting my coaching client Ravi with managing his perfectionism, I am reflecting on my own. I see it emerge in nearly every therapy session. It sits at the core of my life: it drives me to reach further and also leads me to exhaust myself

by lunch. With the help of my therapist, I'm learning to cultivate more self-compassion and reframe this away from 'failure'. In my therapy sessions, my therapist's demeanour towards my perfectionism feels calmer and more generous than my own. Because of this non-verbal transmission of her compassion, I emerge from my sessions feeling more able to accept my imperfect journey and I am learning to allow myself to simply be – perfect or not.

Concluding thoughts

We may continue to spend decades deliberating the territories of psychological change we can claim depending on our titles: coach, counsellor, psychotherapist, coach therapist. Beyond our external practitioner identities, the question that remains is: *how do we practise with integrity in the privacy of our sessions?*

In writing this article, I have shared what I have learned from my own experience of being a client of psychotherapy, and how my coaching practice has been inspired both by my therapists' and clients' commitment to growth. I hope to have communicated both the lessons and the intricate questions this learning has brought to the surface in my coaching practice. Far from being settled, these questions continue to shape my reflections; I hope they also inspire in you a renewed commitment to duty of care.

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We must be honest about the nature of our practices – as they evolve, separate and integrate – with ourselves and our clients alike. BACP's *Ethical Framework*¹ provides a useful anchor in this pursuit and we must continue to question to what degree we are applying this guidance in practice, so that we can embody the primary function of our jobs – to protect and foster human wellbeing and potential. With every well-handled challenge, examined boundary and expansive worldview we pass on, we have the potential to positively influence the development of our clients and the cultures and teams they go on to shape. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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