



Coach Approach & Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

A Synergistic Approach



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As a CBT instructor, I (Lara) often get asked:

- How is CBT currently used in healthcare settings?
- What is the difference between collaborative vs. prescriptive CBT?

As a Coach Approach educator in healthcare, I (Hélène) often get asked:

- How does the Coach Approach enhance CBT delivery?
- How do clinicians decide if they need training in one or both approaches?

This white paper explores these questions to help healthcare professionals determine which training may be most valuable for their practice. Rather than teaching these methods, we focus on how they can complement one another to improve client outcomes and clinician confidence.

What is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)?

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a structured, evidence-based form of psychotherapy. It is grounded in self-awareness—helping individuals recognize and shift unhelpful patterns that interfere with well-being (Beck, 1995).

CBT interventions typically focus on:

- **Identifying patterns** – Self-monitoring tools help clients track recurring thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.
- **Exploring beliefs** – Open-ended questioning (e.g., Socratic dialogue) supports reflection on assumptions and alternative perspectives.
- **Shifting thoughts & behaviors** – Techniques like cognitive restructuring (reframing unhelpful thoughts) and behavioral activation (encouraging engagement in meaningful activities) help clients create adaptive changes.
- **Expanding emotional flexibility** – Third-wave approaches to CBT (e.g., Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Dialectical Behavioural Therapy) integrate mindfulness, self-compassion, and distress tolerance to help clients develop resilience.

Two Approaches to Delivering CBT: Collaborative vs. Prescriptive

Over time, Aaron Beck's original model of CBT, which emphasized Collaborative Empiricism, has been increasingly manualized and protocol-driven (Kazantzis et al., 2017, Okamoto et al., 2019). While manualized CBT interventions enhance efficiency and researchability, an over-reliance on protocols poses the risk of therapists neglecting the collaborative and client-centered processes that are crucial to the effectiveness of CBT delivery. An overly prescriptive approach can reduce engagement, create resistance, and even be harmful if it invalidates the client's lived experience.

Two primary ways CBT is delivered today:

- **Collaborative CBT**: Prioritizes client autonomy, curiosity, and co-exploration of strategies.
- **Prescriptive CBT**: Can feel overly directive—with therapists prescribing strategies instead of co-creating solutions.

Collaborative CBT

- ✓ Emotions/reactions to pain held with compassion and understanding
- ✓ Prioritizes the client's autonomy & expertise in their lived experience
- ✓ Reactions including thoughts/beliefs are named and explored curiously
- ✓ Client is invited to explore tools and new perspectives on their pain and coping
- ✓ The client gets to decide which beliefs and strategies are valid & useful in the context of their lived experience

Prescriptive CBT

- ✗ Employed by clinicians to control an individual's emotional reactions to their pain
- ✗ Thoughts/beliefs identified or diagnosed as 'faulty' or problematic
- ✗ Individual is encouraged to think more positively about their pain
- ✗ Tools/strategies to change thoughts and beliefs are prescribed
- ✗ Can foster self-doubt, undermine autonomy, undermine agency and be incredibly harmful

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What is the Coach Approach in Healthcare?

A Coach Approach serves as an umbrella framework, integrating different modalities—including CBT and Motivational Interviewing—depending on client needs. It is a semi-structured conversational partnership where concrete action plans are co-developed through accessing individuals' strengths, resources, and creativity with the intent to:

- Empower clients to get their occupational wants or needs met.
- Enable sustained change through meaningful self-directed actions (Thériault, 2025).

This approach enables clinicians to determine when to integrate specific techniques:

- If a client is ambivalent, clinicians may incorporate Motivational Interviewing to explore readiness for change.
- If a client lacks self-awareness, CBT techniques can help identify and challenge unhelpful thought patterns.
- If a client is resistant to uncomfortable emotions or sensations, mindfulness techniques are often indicated.
- If a client is struggling to get moving, Graded Exposure or Behavioural Activation are useful techniques.

When obstacles are encountered in the introduction of these approaches to individuals, it is the collaborative process that is essential. Coaching techniques facilitate exploration alongside the client, empowering them to navigate obstacles, adapt, and integrate techniques into their lives in a way that sustains long-term transformation.

How the Coach Approach and CBT Complement Each Other

A Coach Approach does not replace CBT; rather, it offers a framework that helps clinicians embody the qualities of collaborative empiricism, which can sometimes be overshadowed by an over-emphasis on technique. By anchoring clinicians in both mindset metaphors (Amateur, Discoverer, Environmentalist, and Olympian) and concrete strategies, a Coach Approach supports the therapeutic alliance while prioritizing the client's wisdom and lived experience.

These four mindset metaphors represent key qualities that help clinicians maintain a collaborative stance, ensuring that interventions honor client autonomy rather than becoming overly prescriptive. Inspired by ICF Core Competencies, they serve as guiding principles for fostering deep engagement, strengthening client self-efficacy, and integrating interventions in a client-centered way (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 - Dive Into a Coach Approach® Mindset

How the Coach Approach Enhances CBT Delivery

- Facilitates long-term transformation by working from the inside out, focusing on shifts in beliefs, attitudes, and judgments that are led by the client.
- Restores the collaborative spirit of CBT, ensuring interventions honor client autonomy rather than becoming overly prescriptive.
- Supports meaning-making, helping clients align change efforts with personal values and goals.
- Provides a guiding framework to help clinicians avoid getting “stuck” in problem-solving mode, ensuring that solutions are co-created rather than prescribed.

How CBT Can Enhance a Coach Approach

- Provides structure techniques to facilitate self-awareness
- Provides structured cognitive and behavioral strategies to help clients take action when insight alone is insufficient.
- Offers evidence-based tools to support clients with developing healthier coping strategies.
- Equips clinicians with structured interventions to prevent getting “stuck” in unhelpful thought patterns or ineffective program solving.

Synergy Between Both: A More Adaptive, Effective Approach Together

- Promotes client self-efficacy, positioning them as the expert in their own growth, while providing structured support when needed.
- Balances structure and curiosity, allowing for both flexible exploration and structured interventions that align with the client's needs.
- Encourages collaborative problem-solving, ensuring that solutions emerge through client reflection rather than clinician prescription.
- Enhances long-term engagement and follow-through, helping clients bridge the gap between awareness and action.

How Do Clinicians Decide Which Training to Pursue?

If a perceptual barrier is preventing change, coaching techniques facilitate deep exploration, helping clients shift their beliefs, attitudes, judgments, and assumptions in a way that sustains long-term transformation (Reynolds, 2020). CBT shares this foundational aim with a focus on thoughts and behaviours. CBT helps clients examine and shift not only surface-level thoughts but also deeper, more ingrained cognitive distortions and core beliefs that shape their deeply held perceptions and behavioural patterns (Beck, J.S., 2011).

Both the Coach Approach and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) facilitate client change. They can be used independently or in combination, but often have a much greater impact when used together.

Below is a guide to help clinicians determine which training best aligns with their practice goals.

Choose CBT Training If You Want To:

- Learn structured techniques that help clients increase self-awareness, recognize and challenge unhelpful thought patterns, and develop more flexible, adaptive behaviors.
- Work within a structured, evidence-based framework designed to reduce symptoms, while also fostering long-term self-efficacy and resilience.
- Learn evidence-based techniques to integrate into rehabilitation practice for addressing the psychosocial components of pain and chronic illness.
- Develop specialized expertise in cognitive and behavioral therapy models to treat mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

Choose Coach Approach Training If You Want To:

- Cultivate a coaching mindset that fosters trust, curiosity, and deep listening—enhancing collaboration and adaptability across different therapeutic and leadership approaches.
- Use client-driven goal setting to help individuals move toward their desired outcomes through self-discovery and accountability.
- Work within a flexible, strengths-based framework that empowers individuals to develop solutions aligned with their values and motivations.
- Apply coaching techniques in varied healthcare and leadership contexts, supporting prevention, chronic care management, and professional development.

Consider Training in Both If You Want To:

- Support shifts in perceptions (beliefs, attitudes, judgments, and assumptions) that may be preventing sustained behavioral change. Blend structured interventions (CBT) with client-led exploration (Coaching) for a more adaptable and person-centered approach.
- Work with clients who need structure and technique to address specific symptoms as well as those who seek guidance to make lasting changes and integrate strategies into their lives.
- Maximize engagement, autonomy, and sustained behavior change by leveraging both CBT techniques and transformational coaching.

Final Thoughts & Next Steps

As healthcare continues to evolve, integrating Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and the Coach Approach can enhance both patient outcomes and clinician effectiveness. While CBT provides structured interventions for thought and behavior change, the Coach Approach provides a framework for optimizing client engagement in these processes to enhance their impact. The Coach Approach framework provides CBT-trained clinicians with a compass to reconnect with the spirit of Collaborative Empiricism when feeling overly tied to protocols.

Clinicians who understand both models can better tailor interventions to meet individual client needs—whether addressing self-awareness, motivation, or long-term behavior change. Future training programs that combine these approaches may provide a more comprehensive and adaptable toolkit for professionals seeking to optimize client engagement and well-being.

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Lara Desrosiers MSc OT Reg. (Ont) is an Occupational Therapist with over 14 years of experience working in mental health, addictions, pelvic health, and persistent pain. Lara is a teacher and mentor to clinicians interested in developing their psychologically-informed and trauma-informed practices. She has created many courses such as CBT Skills for Distressing Physical Symptoms, ACT for Healthcare Providers, Moving from Fixer to Facilitator: The hardest step in adopting a Biopsychosocial Framework, and the Trauma Informed Pelvic Health Certification Program.

Lara is a proud partner and CEO of AMP Healthcare Education, where we curate impactful learning experiences that help clinicians to translate knowledge and skills into practice.

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Hélène Thériault, BScOT, MAdEd, MCC is a Master Certified Coach, occupational therapist, and founder of Function First Coaching™. As the creator of the Dive Into a Coach Approach® model and an accredited coaching credentialing journey, she specializes in integrating coaching principles into healthcare practice. With over a decade of experience training thousands of healthcare professionals worldwide, Hélène bridges the gap between coaching, cognitive-behavioral strategies, and clinical care to enhance client engagement, autonomy, and well-being. Her work empowers clinicians with evidence-based coaching techniques to transform patient interactions and drive meaningful outcomes in healthcare.



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