



# The 4 Pillars of Ethical Coaching™

A Handbook for Life & Business Coaches

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Ethics for Coaching (EFC) is a grassroots initiative focused on defining and communicating standardized ethical guidelines and psychologically safe practices in the life coaching, business consulting, and self-help industries.

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Version No.: 3

Last updated: August 2023

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Ethics for Coaching

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## Ethics for Coaching Mission

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The mission of EFC is to work with other providers to define and promote standardized ethical guidelines in the life and business coaching industries. EFC defines ethical coaching as personal/professional growth achieved in safe and inclusive spaces that minimize harm, reduce conflict of interest, and protect consumer rights.

## Ethics for Coaching Goals

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- Consumer Advocacy. To provide resources and information for consumers to help them understand and advocate for their rights.
- Legislative Action. To advocate for consumer protection rights at the federal, state, and local legislature levels.
- Consumer Education. To connect consumers with educational resources and learning to help them identify ethical practices in coaching and recognize red flags.
- Professional Training. To connect coaches with external resources for professional training to help them better understand their scope of practice, implement ethical standards of care and trauma-informed business frameworks.
- Anonymous Reporting. To provide a place where consumers review and report breaches in these standardized ethical guidelines.

## Purpose of Resource

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The 4 Pillars of Ethical Coaching™ is a foundational resource to support both consumers and practitioners in the life coaching, business consulting, and self-help industries. This resource will establish common language, proactive recommendations, and accessible examples to serve as a guide for which we can base our conduct. EFC is committed to removing harmful and exploitative practices in order to allow clients to feel safe and fully participate in their personal development. This resource will support the effort toward making the coaching industry a safe and responsible place for everyone.

# Table of Contents

The 4 Pillars of Ethical Coaching™ .....	vii
1. Integrity.....	1
2. Safety.....	20
3. Inclusivity.....	28
4. Professionalism.....	34
References.....	39
About the Authors .....	45
Contributors .....	46

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# The 4 Pillars of Ethical Coaching™

Personal and professional coaching is a \$15 billion industry (Cutshall, 2021). The International Coaching Federation, founded in the United States in 1995, defines coaching as ‘partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential’ (ICF, 2012).

As one of the fastest growing sectors in the world, the coaching industry is also one of the most unregulated industries within the \$4.4 trillion global wellness economy (Wellness Industry Statistics & Facts, n.d.).

Life coaching is a relatively new field, with many non-licensed entrepreneurs offering paid personal, spiritual, business, or educational coaching or consulting services.

The biggest problem with the unregulated coaching industry is that there are no oversight boards, no standardized curricula, and no code of ethics. Coaches do not have formal requirements for education, training, or licensing. Their businesses are often exempt from legal and regulatory oversight.

There is no formal application or acceptance process for life coaching certification programs. A low barrier of entry to become an entrepreneur in the coaching industry enables

anyone to become a coach, regardless of professional training, education, or experience.

Despite its problems, the coaching industry has the potential to help people achieve their goals, realize their potential, heighten their awareness/insight, and improve the quality of their life (Grant, 2003; Altman, 2022). There is a need for helping professionals to take steps to improve the standards of care of the coaching industry. A standardized code of ethics is one way that coaching can be a safe and more responsible experience for everyone.

We propose that ethics in our coaching practice satisfies 3 goals: (1) to minimize harm; (2) to reduce conflict of interest; and (3) to protect consumer rights. Each of these goals will briefly be discussed below.

### Minimize harm

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Coaching is distinct from therapy in that it does not treat people with clinical disorders or mental illness. However, those lines are not always clear and are often blurred in practice (Aboujaoude, 2020). This is because people who pursue coaching services are often motivated to overcome a challenge in their life, but might be unaware that their challenges are rooted in mental health issues. Since coaches are not required to undergo psychological training, they may not be able to recognize mental illness when they see it. This raises concerns for client safety, particularly amongst vulnerable populations; including people with trauma where a trauma therapist would be more appropriate to meet their needs. To further conflate the issues, coaching itself has been developed from a wide range of therapeutic modalities including, but not limited to, cognitive and behavioral psy-



chology, positive psychology, alternative therapies, Eastern philosophies, and Western esotericism. In the unruly world of coaching, steps need to be taken to minimize harm and ensure that coaches are not practicing therapy without a license.

### Reduce conflict of interest

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The fact that coaches don't need to adhere to regulatory standards gives them more freedom to play with how they run their business, from promoting themselves and targeting specific niches, to profit models that unquestionably resemble multi-level marketing (MLM) frameworks (Abella, 2017). This presents a conflict of interest whereby coaches face the constant ethical dilemma between their dual roles as entrepreneurs and helping professionals. They are in the business to both make money and to heal, which makes it challenging to be impartial and objective where financial incentives and risks are high. It's expected for coaches to act in ways that protect their clients' interests, not their own. It is therefore vital to review and understand a professional code of ethics to remove the gray areas as much as possible. To eliminate conflict of interest, coaches should maintain a standardized approach to care, including pricing structures (which are currently unregulated; coaches can charge whatever price they want to in a free market).

### Protect consumer rights

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Most coaching certification programs are not recognized by any outside authority, leaving many coaches to operate in the murky realm of marketing that allows coaches to target vulnerable populations or overstate what they can help

clients accomplish. Specific legal protections for consumers who are victims of coaching scams have been left out of the basic consumer protection laws that have been developed over the years. Consumer rights legislation such as H.R. 2668 protect against unlawful business practices such as false advertising, consumer fraud, and anticompetitive conduct; however, the coaching industry has been able to fly under the radar of standards of business ethics set forth by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC). As such, consumers are exposed to coercive control techniques, deceptive advertising, risk of serious financial, physical, or emotional harm, and other exploitative business practices.

## Conclusion

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In order to minimize harm, reduce conflict of interest, and protect consumer rights, we introduce and discuss 4 pillars for ethical coaching, along with practical examples for each. This guide is not meant to limit creative freedom or discourage aspiring coaches from practicing their unique craft; rather, it is meant to support coaches to practice their craft with (1) integrity, (2) safety, (3) inclusivity, and (4) professionalism. The suggestions and recommendations contained in this guide are intended to help coaches make decisions that are mutually beneficial for them, their businesses, their clients, and society as a whole.

## How to use this handbook

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Fair warning: there is A LOT of info in this handbook. Please know that this little handbook packs a punch for the sake of being thorough and detailed, not to be overwhelming to you!

That said, it would be unrealistic for any person to apply these principles in a reasonable time frame. Not everything in this guide is meant to be digested and implemented right away (obviously)! In fact, not everything is meant to be digested or implemented PERIOD. Not everything is for everyone, so we encourage you to use your better judgment, creativity, and critical thinking when reflecting on whether a certain principle or idea feels relevant to you and your business.

The entire premise of ethics is based on being flexible, collaborative, and fluid in the way we apply these principles into our daily practice. The best way to approach ethics is through the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law. This is what helps us avoid falling into the trappings of myopic problem-solving, dogmatic thinking, and rigidity.

Keep in mind that the authors of this handbook are business owners and entrepreneurs. Which means we understand how difficult it is to make a business work, and feel compassionate towards the additional challenges that this handbook might bring. Therefore, it is important to set reasonable expectations and not approach these suggestions as laws that will make or break your practice. The principles are supposed to be gradually incorporated into our own practice over time in a way that feels authentic. If something feels challenging or does not align with your goals, come back to it some other time, or start a conversation!

Please don't hesitate to reach out to us if you have any questions, comments, or feedback. And know there is plenty of support in this community to help you build a more ethical coaching practice.

Thank you for reading our handbook; we hope it will serve as a useful tool for you.

We welcome you to join our social media campaign to raise awareness about our cause and #stopthescam.



To learn more, [download our campaign toolkit here](#).

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# 1

## INTEGRITY

Integrity is the quality of being honest and having strong principles and values. Integrity can be understood as how you conduct yourself behind closed doors. This is important when facilitating any type of personal growth, including entrepreneurial development. Integrity includes trustworthiness, reliability, and accountability, which are imperative when building best practices around your business. Integrity shows up in how we market & deliver our service and build relationships with our clients & team. Being in integrity means prioritizing clients' interests (above yours), and following through with actions that are guided by clients' values (not yours). Oftentimes this means doing what is in your clients' best interests versus what is convenient, easy, quick, or profitable for your business.

### A. Marketing/Advertising

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Ethical marketing is honest, fair, and transparent language that does not attempt to manipulate, coerce, or mislead consumers. This includes full transparency of your specific process or methods used, as well as communicating any potential for risk to the client. This is important for protect-

ing the client's informed consent; clients (as consumers) are entitled to know exactly what they are getting, any potential for risks involved, and what is being done to mitigate that risk. This is to ensure that coaches and facilitators are not inadvertently perpetuating clients' challenges/traumas and the client is fully informed in their decision making.

- Realistic outcomes and full, transparent disclosure of results.

In order to manage clients' expectations, any claims that you make in your marketing should disclose realistic results (such as the actual percentage of clients who have achieved atypical results vs. those who achieved more normal/typical outcomes). A disclaimer should be made that "results are not typical" if you are highlighting results that are unusual/extreme and/or could be achieved by other means. This is to ensure that you are managing clients' expectations and not overpromising outcomes. Overpromising outcomes is misleading and it can harm not just your client but also your business.

Ex. Client A and B both begin a program to start an online coaching business. Client A has financial security so they don't need to work; the coaching business for client A is a passion project to bring in extra income for the family. Client B, on the other hand, is a single parent who works full time and wants to transition to an online business so they can have more time and financial freedom for themselves and their kids in the future. Client A is in a more secure position to start a business and the risks are not as high. Client B does



not have the same level of time or security as Client A. Being in integrity means acknowledging that Client A and B's baseline starting point has a big discrepancy when enrolling and promising results. As such, the marketing for the program should not just highlight the atypical results achieved by Client A. Integrity means there is honesty about average results and putting a disclaimer when results are not typical. This ensures that procedures are in line with the needs/capacity of the client, not the coach.

## Case study: The ethical dilemma of Multi-level or Network Marketing

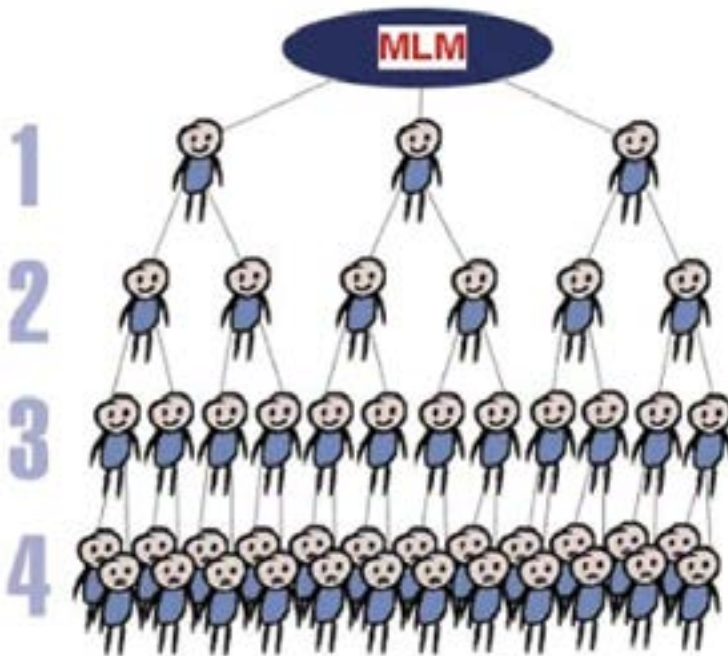


Image Credit: [christopherjohnlindsay.com](http://christopherjohnlindsay.com)

Multi-level or network marketing is a controversial type of business model in which company shareholders receive profits, dividends, bonuses, discounts, commissions or other 'perks' in two ways: either by directly selling a product or service to friends and family in their 'network' AND/OR recruiting other shareholders into their "downline" to sell the products.

While MLMs are legal, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has [flagged](#) MLMs as similar to pyramid schemes that are

illegal. Consumer rights advocates are currently lobbying for the FTC to tighten its regulations around MLMs due the inherent nature of its unethical business model that replicates many of the business practices central to pyramid schemes, such as false promises, outrageous and misleading claims, exploitative recruitment tactics, and high-pressure sales to name a few.

What makes MLMs unethical? Similar to pyramid schemes, many MLMs rely on the constant recruitment of new sellers which means that the bigger the company grows, the fewer opportunities new recruits have to make money. This model allows for few people to shoot to the top (and stay there) while 99% of people lose money (Taylor, 2011), and many plunge into [debt and psychological crisis](#).

What do MLMs and the coaching industry have in common? While the coaching marketplace is an opportunity for authentic entrepreneurs to build a business, the unregulated nature of the coaching industry has allowed many coaches to employ the same MLM and pyramid-type deceptive marketing/sales tactics, coercive control recruitment strategies, and unfair business practices that violate federal consumer protection laws.

Learn more about the 'dark side' of MLM's:

- [\\$5 jewelry and an MLM conference gone wrong](#)
- [The empty dream that LulaRoe sold](#)
- [How the Pandemic Stoked a Backlash to Multilevel Marketing](#)
- [The Moral and Ethical Argument Against Multilevel Marketing](#)
- [How MLMs and cults use the same mind control techniques](#)
- [Multilevel marketing groups operate much like cults](#)

## Know About: Base-rate Fallacy

Many people make financially risky decisions due to the base-rate fallacy, which is a cognitive bias that leads people to underestimate, overestimate, or ignore information about risk.

For example, the base rate fallacy might lead someone to invest in an MLM, despite knowing that 99% of people lose money. Predatory marketers exploit peoples' base rate fallacy by overemphasizing the success of the 1% (this is what we typically see in raving testimonials), while deliberately leaving out information about those who went into financial crises like bankruptcy, foreclosure, or debt.

### Transparent pricing

Transparent pricing is about empowering consumers to become price-aware by disclosing costs upfront. This has to do with the balance of power (through pricing information) between the coach and the client. In other words, it can be considered unethical to deliberately withhold pricing information from a potential client (Guo, 2021). Withholding the price of your service is often designed to get consumers into a micro-commitment in order to boost the chances of them complying with much larger requests later. This is called the [foot-in-the-door technique](#), which is a psychological compliance strategy that utilizes coercive control by deliberately withholding information that could interfere with the consumer's decision-making process.

Ex. Enrolling clients in your program and then upselling them on a bigger offer midway through the program, accompanied with the promise that they will achieve better results with the new upsell.

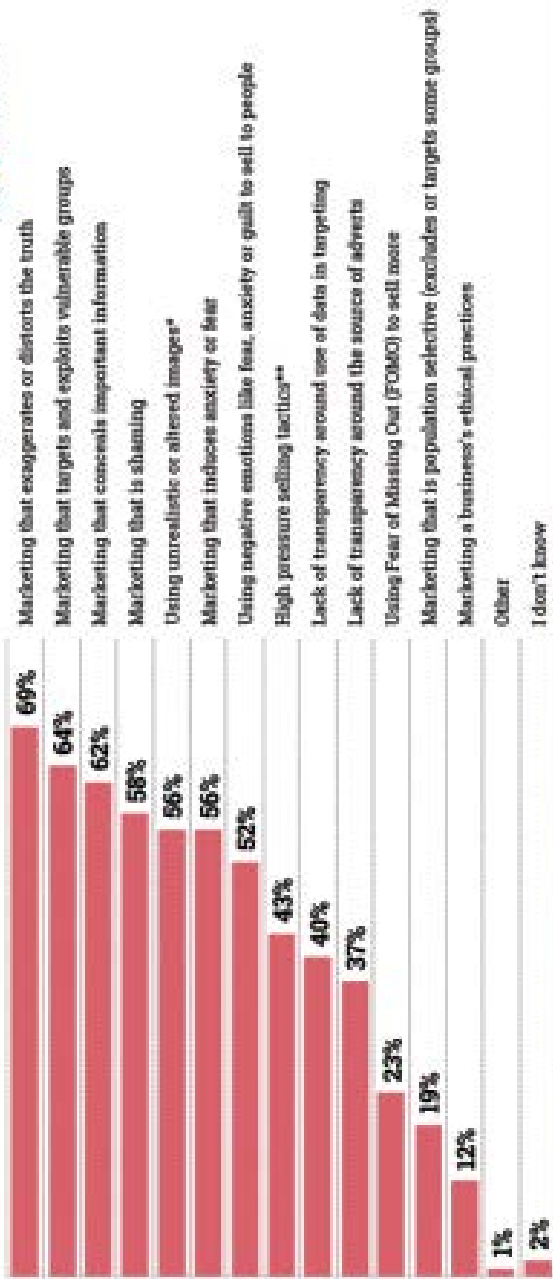
Ex. Not revealing the price of your services until the client goes through the time and energy of filling out a lengthy application.

## Know About: Sunk Cost Fallacy

The sunk-cost fallacy is the tendency to follow through on an endeavor if we have already invested time, money, or effort, even if the current costs outweigh the benefits.

Predatory marketers exploit this by promoting a, “you might as well/what’s another \$1,000/what do you have to lose?” mindset. Just because our past investments are unrecoverable, doesn’t mean we should continue investing if it no longer serves our best interests.

## What Best Describes Unethical Marketing



Published on MarketingCharts.com in June 2019 | Data Source: Phrasize

*Based on a survey of 600 members based in the US and UK (Full answer: Using unrealistic or altered images (for example airbrushed fashion models)*

*\*\*Full answer: High pressure selling tactics - using urgency (real or false) or something's availability to drive response\**

Source: [marketingcharts.com](https://marketingcharts.com)

- Transparency of Deliverables

Transparency of deliverables means giving clients a clear outline on what is being delivered (product/service), how it will be delivered (procedure), and the empirical evidence that supports your intervention or methodology (if any). This is again about the balance of power between the client and the coach. Instead of prioritizing your gains, the priority is to increase your client's decision-making capacity by giving them all the information they need to make an informed, consensual decision.

Ex: A coach has a program that teaches people nervous system regulation. Because the coach's niche is a vulnerable population (presumably people with dysregulated nervous systems), they should ensure that there are no surprises (which would trigger clients' dysregulation) by giving the client enough information about the program upfront. This includes procedure, deliverables, pricing, and any planned upsells.

Ex. A coach works with aspiring business coaches who have issues with perfectionism and self-sabotage. The coach would ensure that the methodologies and intervention they use are backed by sound psychological science. If the coach incorporates esoteric or 'alternative' practices like Human Design, full disclosure of risks must be addressed (such as the lack of empirical support for this intervention).

Ex. A coach offers energy medicine as part of their services. If the coach is not an indigenous keeper or initiated into a lineage by one, they **MUST** adhere to the standards set forth by the World Intellectual Property

Organization (WIPO) for [Protecting Intellectual Property and Traditional Medical Knowledge](#). Cultural appropriation aside, intellectual theft is extremely unethical (and in some cases, illegal).

Ex. 'Secret offers' that ask clients to make an investment into a product/service without knowing what they will be getting, are unethical. Consumers are entitled to have all the information they need to make an informed decision.

- **Transparent Communication**

Buzzwords and catchphrases are not unethical per say, but it's best to use them sparingly and in the right context. When it comes to marketing copy, buzzwords can certainly be used for literary/stylistic effect but it shouldn't replace clear and cogent communication. In other words, using buzzwords should not come at the cost of compromising a consumer's capacity to make an informed decision about your program or offering. In worst cases, buzzwords are used to intentionally mislead and confuse consumers with loaded language (aka 'word salad') through neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), hypnosis, and other psychological techniques that can be used for thought reform and coercive control by deceptive and/or untrained practitioners.

Ex. Imagine what it would be like to make money in your sleep. What if I told you that you could 10x and scale your business to 7-8 figures simply by becoming a vibrational match to the limitless abundance of the universe. Don't walk, JUMP into my magnetic price



portal to receive these wealth codes so you too can quantum leap into your financial revolution.

Read: [The FTC's Guide to Advertising and Marketing on the Internet](#)

Read: [When a Business Offer or a Coaching Program is a Scam](#)

## B. Sales

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Ethical sales is honest, trustworthy, supportive, compassionate, and accurate information that truly has the client's best interests at heart. Ethical sales treats every prospective client with respect and fairness. This means not forcing or pressuring the client to make impulsive decisions that are going to exacerbate financial hardship or create more stress for the client. The burden is on the coach to create a safe environment where the client does not feel pressured to close a sale. It especially includes not shaming/guilt-tripping clients for declining your offer.

- Scarcity and urgency tactics

Scarcity is a powerful influence tool because it invokes a survival response and triggers our [loss-aversion](#). Loss-aversion leads to poor decision-making because the fear of missing out (FOMO) shuts down our critical thinking capacity and makes us more vulnerable to making emotional, instead of logical decisions. People are impulsive when they are emotional. Using scarcity or urgency on a sales call is done to intentionally

manipulate a person's emotional state to close a sale (Otamendi and Martin, 2020).

Ex. False scarcity tactics like, "only a few spaces left" or "this might be your last chance to enroll" when there are plenty of spaces and you offer the program every year.

Ex. Discouraging potential clients from taking time to think about it or discuss their investment decisions with their partners or family.

Ex. False urgency tactics like, "the universe rewards those who move quickly," to encourage people to make impulsive decisions as "proof" of their commitment.

Ex. Using the fear of death to trigger [mortality salience](#) and make people aware of their impending death, even though the product or service you're selling has no relation to death. "What if this was the last day of your life, would you still let fear stop you?" "Imagine dying without having followed your dreams."

Ex. Using arbitrary countdowns like, "price increases tomorrow!" to promote impulsive buying.

- Mindset manipulation tactics for overcoming objections.

Mindset manipulation tactics attribute all client objections and/or issues with the coach or program as a mindset issue or limiting belief. This often comes at the cost of overlooking, bypassing, undermining, dis-

missing, or ignoring clients' valid concerns or real-life struggles (financial or otherwise).

Ex. Using fear tactics to punish, shame, or guilt clients for having objections such as, "bad karma," or "you're sending a bad message to the universe that you're a quitter," or "who's going to want to work with you when you're vibrating at this level of scarcity?"

Ex. Inducing psychologically distressing states to act as purchasing motivators, such as:

- Shame - "strong women make their own decisions without having to ask their partner."
  - Insecurity- "if your partner really supported you, you wouldn't need to ask permission."
  - Confusion- "people who feel worthy invest in themselves and you can't have the success you want unless you believe you are worthy."
- Higher-pressure selling

High-pressure sales are aggressive persuasion or 'hard' selling tactics that push consumers to buy blindly by intentionally deceiving or not sharing relevant info that could influence a potential client's decision to invest.

Ex. 'Love bombing' a client to establish rapport or trust for the purpose of closing a deal. This happens when a coach shows excessive adoration, affection, or attention in order to create feelings of unity, closeness, or intimacy with a potential client. This creates emotional dependency when it is paired with withholding love in

a way that makes the person feel confused about what they did wrong.

- Poaching a client by pretending to have authentic interest in them but secretly having an ulterior motive to sell them their product or service.

Ex. Ignoring the suitability of the program for the client and pushing the sale.

- Pushing a 'one-size-fits-all' sales script that ignores the client's unique situation.

Ex. Mindset manipulation scripts that are designed to 'talk through' someone's objection of buying the product or service.

- The client expresses hesitation about the price and is told, "of course you are scared because your life is about to change, but this is your first opportunity to overcome your scarcity mindset and finally invest in yourself!"
- Dominating the conversation rather than listening to prospective clients' unique needs, desires, and circumstances.

Ex. When the client expresses financial objections, the coach pretends that money is not the 'real' reason people don't invest, or that financial objections are psychological and have nothing to do with money.

Ex. Potential client expresses that they're not able to afford the product/service at the moment and is told,

“what price would you pay for becoming the best version of yourself?”

- Becoming aggressive, hostile, rude, or offensive when the client decides to walk away from the offer, even if they had initially expressed interest.

Ex. The client says that they changed their mind about investing and is told, “No wonder you’re such a loser.”

- Making exaggerated promises to close the sale at all costs

Ex. Suggesting that a prospective client should take out a loan, cash advance; or line of credit, max out their credit card(s); or borrow money because they’ll make 10x back in one month.

- Encouraging prospective clients to take financial risks without knowing their unique financial situation

Ex. Pushing a “high-risk/high reward” mindset or telling them, “you’ve already invested so much, what do you have to lose?”

- Cold messaging or emailing client prospects.

Ex. Continuously sending follow-up messages to client prospects who go cold is a boundary violation and in some cases can constitute harassment.

- Appealing to prospective clients’ spiritual or religious beliefs to close a sale

Ex. What would Jesus want you to do?

- Appealing to prospective clients' biases, ignorance, or weaknesses.

Ex. When speaking to clients who don't have a scientific background, using scientific jargon as a way to establish authority or expertise. (Appeal to ignorance)

Ex. When speaking to clients who are highly suggestible, using hypnosis techniques to manipulate their experiences. (Appeal bias)

Ex. When speaking to clients who are trying to lose weight, peddling 'detox teas' or other dubious methods that promise overnight results. (Appeal to weakness)

- Deceptive pricing practices

Deceptive pricing practices intentionally mislead consumers to make a product/service appear more competitive or better than it is. In some cases, deceptive pricing practices violate certain consumer protection laws. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has issued a [Guide for Deceptive Pricing](#) which should be reviewed for more information.

Ex. Bait and Switch. Creating an attractive or disingenuous offer at a low cost in order to "bait" a consumer into buying a more expensive product.

- A coach advertises a self-paced course at a low price in a limited quantity. When a potential client expresses interest in the course, the coach

tells them it's no longer available in order to sell a more expensive offer.

Ex. False advertising. Labeling the price as a discount when it's the normal price or running a promotion when there was never an intention to sell the product at a full price.

- A coach advertises their full-priced course at a "pre-sale" price in order to give the fictitious impression of a discount.

Ex. "New" offers that are not new.

- A coach promotes a "secret new offer" to their clients for a program that they have offered in the past.

Ex. Exorbitant rates. While there are no fixed rules or regulations for how much you should charge for your service, your pricing should reflect your level of education and experience relative to the industry market rate (at a minimum). One suggestion is to build-in accessible pricing options and compare your market rate to the cost of living/average income level of the demographic you are targeting to ensure affordability.

- A coach just graduated from a 6-month coaching program and is charging people \$1,000 for a 3 week anxiety program. For \$1,000, someone could receive 40-65 sessions with a licensed mental health provider, with insurance. Even out of pocket costs would get them between 15-30 sessions with a licensed professional.

Ex. Price gouging. Price gouging occurs when a seller takes unfair advantage of a consumer during an emergency by increasing their prices at a level much higher than what is considered reasonable or fair.

- A coach specifically targets people who have just filed for bankruptcy to sell them a “how to make money fast” coaching program at \$20k. While this is not the traditional use of the term ‘price gouging,’ it is possible that one may apply the spirit of the law to understand the insidious nature of selling directly to someone’s crisis to push an unreasonable offer.

### C. Nonviolent communication

Nonviolent communication (NVC) is a skillful dialogue of addressing conflict, misunderstanding, or disagreement in a compassionate and harmonious way. It is unethical for coaches to judge, withdraw, blame, or attack their clients under any circumstances, particularly because the coach is always in the position of power. Creating a hostile or offensive environment on the basis of a hierarchical power dynamic is unethical. This includes showing defensiveness or blame when the client does not cooperate with the program or achieve desired outcomes. The coach should always foster constructive conversations based on connection, compassion, and mutual needs. Of course, coaches are human and are not expected to be perfect! The skills of conflict management, taking accountability, and making reparations all come with the practice of NVC over time.

- Receptivity to feedback



A coach should be open to feedback and collaborate towards a solution when the client is unhappy with the delivery or expresses any concerns during the program. It is important for clients to feel safe in expressing any negative feelings; concerns should be addressed with integrity, care, and professionalism. It is recommended to build in a mechanism for anonymous feedback both during and after the program. If a client is unsatisfied in the facilitators program and opens the conversation for feedback, the facilitator needs to validate the client's concerns, make reparations for any misunderstandings, suggest ways to improve their course, and implement feedback to support the client's unique needs.

Ex. A coach's client expresses disappointment or frustration during the program because it did not meet the client's needs. Instead of hearing the client's feedback and asking questions to understand the problem, the coach becomes defensive and judgemental. She labels their client's behavior as 'resistant' or incorrectly links the client's complaints as unresolved psychological issues.

# 2

## SAFETY

Safety is creating an environment (through the use of policies, behaviors, guidelines, contracts, etc) that protects individuals from harm. Safety is respecting the values as well as the physical, material, and psychological integrity of individuals. Conditions for harm are controlled or minimized in order to preserve the health and wellbeing of individuals and the community. This means creating a climate of social cohesion and peace, as well as being fair and impartial and making decisions that are free from bias or favoritism.

### A. Emotional/Psychological Harm

It is the responsibility of the coach and the coach's team to create a coaching environment that is emotionally/psychologically safe for all clients. The topic of emotional/psychological safety can be very nuanced and facilitators are encouraged to seek out peer consultation and supervisory support. With clear and agreed upon expectations, the client is given a clear choice and agency in the process.

- Coercive control

Coercive control is a form of undue social influence based on mind control or intimidation techniques intended to manipulate a person's behavior against their best wishes. This occurs through behavior, emotion, thought, and information control. We often think that a person has free will to leave an unsafe situation, but people who are under undue social influence make decisions that they otherwise would not feel safe making because their decision-making capacity has been severely impaired within a hierarchical and possibly abuse of power dynamic. A person under undue social influence is not making decisions from a place of informed consent that represents their whole person.

Read: [Steven Hassan's BITE model of authoritarian control](#)

Ex. Emotional or Spiritual Bypassing: Focusing on positive thoughts/emotions by using spiritual or emotional platitudes to undermine, deny, dismiss, or sidestep a client's uncomfortable or painful emotions.

- If a client expresses being anxious about selling their next program, and the business coach says 'you need to focus on outcomes and stop allowing the negative emotions to lower your vibration' v.s. acknowledging and validating their anxiety, showing them empathy and support, and compassionately helping them find a solution.

Ex. Programming fears or phobias: Cultivating fears about leaving the program or publicly criticizing the client by implying that something terrible will hap-

pen (like karma or hell), or threatening to sue or “take down” a client.

- “If you leave now, what kind of message are you sending to the universe?”
- “You’re just going to be stuck in the same pattern you’ve always been stuck in.”
- “Successful people don’t quit!”

Ex. Critical thinking questions are shut down: Discouraging clients from seeking outside information and putting full faith in the facilitator.

- When a potential client says they’d like to hear from past clients who haven’t had a good experience from the program and the coach becomes angry, defensive, dismissive, or denies the request.

Ex. Promoting feelings of guilt, shame, or worthlessness or teaching thought-terminating techniques that block feelings of anger, doubt, or sadness.

Examples of thought-terminating cliches

- Everything happens for a reason
- Everything is happening for your highest good
- Triggers are showing you where you need to heal
- The only moment that matters is now
- The only thing that’s real is the present
- The truth will set you free
- Be here now

- The universe has my back

Ex. Emotional or Spiritual Gaslighting: When facilitators don't validate and acknowledge the client's emotions and uses psychologically manipulative techniques to 'hack' a client's mind into thinking that healing is happening when it's not.

- When a client expresses feeling discomfort in the program and the coach tells them the discomfort is a sign that they are 'raising their vibration' or around a high vibrational person (the coach). While it's true that a client may experience a shift or intensification in certain psychological and physical symptoms such as disruptive sleep patterns, increased anxiety, and remembering things previously forgotten, this does not necessarily indicate that healing is happening. Instead, the coach should validate the client's experience and help them unpack what they are experiencing, instead of interpreting their experience for them.

Read: [How Gaslighting Manipulates Reality](#)

Ex. Blame-shifting: Making a person believe that their problems are all their fault, or assuming the victim status to deflect blame.

- When a client has a launch that doesn't work out despite following all the rules, the coach decides that it was the client's 'energy' or 'vibration' as the reason their launch wasn't successful.

- When a client expresses a wish to terminate a payment plan (either because they are unhappy with the program or their financial situation has changed) and the coach decides it's because the client is in a 'victim mindset.'
- When a client expresses concerns about something they experience in the program, and the coach accuses the client of being mean or bullying.

Ex. Deception: Deliberately withholding or distorting information to make it more acceptable or appealing.

- A coach deletes or edits critical feedback, comments, or testimonials on their program and only allows positive reviews.

Ex. Logical fallacy: Using faulty reason or logic to avoid, sidestep, dismiss, or undermine anxiety-provoking emotions.

- Explaining metaphysical concepts using scientific jargon to make unfounded claims seem more valid than they actually are. For example, suggesting that you can manipulate your "vibrational energy" levels through certain activities that lower or raise our vibration. While it is true that vibrational energy is present on a particle level, there has been no demonstrable evidence that it's something that contributes to the way we behave or something that we can effectively control.

## Know About: The Window of Tolerance

The [Window of Tolerance](#) is the zone of arousal in which a person is able to function most effectively. The window of tolerance is a state between hyper and hypo-arousal. Understanding and working with your client's window of tolerance is a trauma-mindful response that helps clients return to a state of nervous system co-regulation when they become emotionally 'flooded.'

Case study: A facilitator is providing coaching on a call and notices that the client is unable to contain their emotional and physical responses (this might present as hysterical crying, hyperventilating, uncontrollable shaking).

The facilitator continues to push the client and says, "This is a sign that it's working, let's keep going, keep digging into another hidden layer of your childhood trauma" (emotional bypassing) OR "This is your 'shadow work' and you have to keep going deeper into the darkness to come into the light" (spiritual bypassing).

The client eventually shuts down (this may look like a calm state), but they are dissociating and experiencing secondary trauma.

A safe approach looks like: facilitator asks for permission from the client to proceed with a coaching

it's too much and you want to stop, please tell me and we'll stop right away." If the client does not give verbal consent, the coach should not move forward with the session.

- Appropriate support during breakout sessions with smaller groups

Ex: During a breakout session, a client becomes emotionally flooded and no one is trained to support them. This can re-trigger trauma if it's

## B. Sexual Misconduct

Sexual behavior between a coach and client can harm a client due to the hierarchical power dynamics at play. Sexual misconduct on behalf of a coach can be considered a form of exploitation and abuse. While it may be subtle, it usually feels uncomfortable to the client. Sexual misconduct in any kind of therapeutic alliance is not only unethical, but illegal in many states.

- Sexual misconduct includes, but is not limited to:
  - Having sexual relations with a client.
  - Telling sexual jokes or stories
  - Unwanted physical contact
  - Flirting, seducing, or making sexually explicit comments to clients during a coaching or sales call
  - Telling a client that they are special or see a special spiritual gift in them



- Sending sexually explicit messages or images to clients
- Excessive out-of-session communication not related to coaching
- Dating a client

### C. Safety First

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A 'safety-first' approach includes understanding the prospective client's situation and always addressing safety concerns first.

Ex. If a potential client comes to a facilitator for business support and mentions living in an abusive household, it is the facilitator's responsibility to address the safety concerns and prioritize safety issues first. This might look like referring the client out to proper care and not working with them until they are in a safe and stable environment.

Ex. Gathering information about the client's current finances, living situation, mental health, support system etc. to make sure you are assessing their needs properly.

# 3

## INCLUSIVITY

Inclusivity is about creating an environment in which all people feel valued and respected, regardless of race, gender identification, sexual orientation, age, physical/mental ability, education level, country of origin, ethnicity, and religion. Creating an inclusive environment refers to the action steps taken to include people from different backgrounds and demographics. It's also important for the facilitator to learn about inequality and social injustices that certain groups experience in order to minimize subtle biases, discrimination, stereotypes, and judgements towards the people they serve, especially if those people belong to vulnerable or historically marginalized populations. Inclusivity also means being sensitive to the client's unique circumstances and conditions such as access to resources, time, money, support system, living environment, mental or physical disabilities, etc.

### A. Cultural safety

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Cultural safety (Curtis et al., 2019) addresses the multiple and complex factors that contribute to social inequities in wealth, power, and privilege. The relationship between a

service provider and their client is especially susceptible to implicit or explicit bias. It's important to note that multicultural safety is less about acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes of a person's culture, but more about being sensitive towards a client's social and cultural needs.

Cultural safety starts with the understanding that the coaching industry, similar to other wellness and counseling industries, are based on Eurocentric practices and perspectives that are assumed to be universal but are overwhelmingly biased towards those who hold power, resources, and privilege within the current social structures. Multicultural safety means shifting away from conventional Western practices and perspectives to provide services that are client-centered, culturally responsive, and diverse.

- Intersecting identities

Intersecting identity refers to the idea that an individual's identity consists of multiple, intersecting factors such as gender identity, race, gender expression, ethnicity, class, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, etc. Clients and professionals are both members of diverse groups based on intersecting identities. These identities invite interpersonal power differences between the provider-client interaction. These power dynamics are salient depending on how each individual is experiencing the current interaction.

Ex. Brittany is a Black, heterosexual coach who identifies as a woman. Jay is a Black gay client who identifies as a man. Brittany and Jay may experience their relationship through various lenses. They may both perceive their interaction from shared racial iden-

tities. However, Jay may feel misunderstood and at a disadvantage due to Brittany's heteronormative privilege. Another possibility is that Brittany may be placed at a disadvantage due to Jay's male privilege.

- Coach's self-awareness

Facilitators need to be aware and consider how their own biases, attitudes, assumptions, stereotypes, and prejudices might interfere with the quality of care they can provide to clients from different backgrounds and life experiences. It is important not to "other" others and the invitation is to reflect on one's own biases, privilege, and power rather than simply acquiring knowledge about someone's background or culture.

Facilitators need to educate themselves, get supervision, and maintain self-awareness and social awareness of power structures that affect their clients. This way, they can better attune to their clients' experiences, navigate complex conversations, and make culturally responsive recommendations.

Ex. To respond effectively to BIPOC clients, a culturally competent trauma coach should be able to contextualize the experience of trauma from the perspective of ongoing systemic and social discrimination, instead of solely addressing trauma through the lens of childhood or latent experiences.

- Facilitators need to develop the skills to interpret microaggressions, explore sensitive topics, and navigate conflict. Maintaining neutrality when engaging with clients is necessary when

it comes to polarizing discussions, topics, and perspectives.

Ex. Culturally responsive coaches can support clients develop awareness around experiences with racism, sexism, ableism, classism, religious oppression, homophobia, transphobia, or other instances of microaggression and discrimination. A culturally responsive approach includes using empowering frameworks and techniques to help clients express feelings of anger or despair from frequent experiences of discrimination and oppression.

## B. Anti-oppressive Framework

An anti-oppressive framework is the strategy and method for understanding how systems of oppression such as colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ageism, and ableism can result in discriminatory practices and systemic injustice towards certain individuals and groups of people in society. Anti-oppressive practices seek to mitigate harm and address inequalities on an individual, group, or institutional level.

### [Take the Oppression and Privilege self-assessment tool](#)

- Move beyond blanket/generalized advice or one-size-fits-all approaches. Know your clients and understand who they are, what they need, and what their personal situation is. What works for one client might not work for someone else with different circumstances, needs, and abilities.

Ex. An anti-oppressive nutrition coach will offer a range of price-conscious options for healthy eating because they understand that not everyone has the means to regularly buy organic food.

Ex. An anti-oppressive feminine embodiment coach will not use gender binary descriptors/categorizations of the gender experience because they understand that trans people are gender nonconforming.

Ex. An anti-oppressive financial coach will not talk about “manifesting abundance” because they understand that some people face real social and systemic barriers to wealth.

Ex. An anti-oppressive health coach will not impose their belief that disease is a ‘spiritual gift’ because they understand that not everyone seeks meaning and purpose in their illness.

Ex. An anti-oppressive spiritual coach will not talk about ‘dissolving’ mental illness through meditation because they understand that mental illness is caused by a combination of factors like genes, trauma, environment, stress, biology, etc.

- Understand how social norms and stereotypes can impact clients and facilitate conversations related to how clients from privileged and marginalized identities might experience their reality. When relevant, these discussions can help facilitators gain rich insight into their client’s demographic and cultural background.

Ex. A coach can ask their client, “what is it like to be the only Latina woman working in a predominantly white setting?”

Ex. A coach can ask their client, “how is it to navigate your workplace as a person with a disability?”

Ex. A coach can ask their client, “how does it feel to be a woman in a patriarchal culture?”

Ex. A coach can ask their client, “what is it like to engage with your liberal classmates who don’t share your conservative views?”

# 4

## PROFESSIONALISM

Professionalism is defined as the competence or skill expected of a professional. It can be understood as an individual's adherence to a set of standards, code of conduct, or collection of qualities that characterize accepted practices within a profession. Moreover, professional skills and behaviors go beyond what an ordinary person would do in the same situation.

### A. Establish competence and maintain professional boundaries

- Contracts are an important way to establish professional boundaries. Contracts should explicitly state what activities, teaching and practices are included in the package, course or event and how it will be delivered.

Ex. If you're coaching a client who is also seeing a therapist, it's important not to overstep your role as a coach if that wasn't in the contract.



- You are a business coach working with a client who wants to grow their online business, and this client is also seeing a therapist about a past trauma. As their coach, it is your job to follow an action plan to help your client build their business; it is not your role to do any trauma work with them, regardless of whether you are licensed or trained to do so.

Ex. If you are coaching a client who is also in therapy, the therapeutic treatment plan should take precedence. If your client feels that any aspect of your coaching is in conflict with their therapeutic goals, then you should stop. The client's mental health is always a priority. Coaches should never pressure a client to continue a service that is contraindicated to their mental health.

- Be open about what you know and what you don't know.

Ex. Telling people you are still learning more about a certain modality and will share the latest findings as they become available is more important in maintaining your ethics and credibility over the long term, than assuming expertise or authority on a subject you don't know about.

- State objectives and outcomes - Outcomes are your minimum guarantee with your program and should be achievable by every student.
- Did you know? Under the FTC code of regulations, a business that makes earning claims is required by law to provide proof and failure to do so is consid-

ered an unfair or deceptive act or practice in violation of Section 5 of the FTC Act.

[Learn about the 'Business Opportunity Rule'](#)

- Must carry at least \$250,000 of professional insurance.

## B. Appropriateness - Confidentiality/ non exploitation

- Permission-based advertising of client testimonials, success stories
- Permission-based advertising of clients joining programs
- Personal information revealed during a coaching session should be confidential unless permission is granted by client
- Coaches MUST NOT make testimonials or permission to share outcomes a requirement for participating in the program. It is unethical to ask or require clients to write testimonials while they are still in the program.

## C. Knowledge - Strong knowledge of professional intake, scope of practice and referral process

- Assessment tool for mental health referral
- Onboarding form
- Terms and agreements with mental health clause
- Coaches shall be committed to strive toward expanding their professional knowledge and skills that are being used within their practice.

- Coaches must coach each client within the limits of their training and competence, as advertised accordingly.

Ex. It is unethical for a coach to provide a course on Nervous System Regulation when they have no formal training with a certificate of completion on the Nervous System.

#### D. Competence-Board certified continuing education

- Ongoing supervision
- Continuing Education classes in Ethics, Ethical Marketing, Mental Health awareness, Crisis, How to safely remove someone from a group program, how to refer out safely, Risk Management

#### E. Conscientiousness - Contracts and follow through

- Risk disclosure is displayed in 12 Bold print, to be signed and acknowledged by the client.
- Credentials, Certifications and Degrees must be outlined
- Produce Risk Management plan (If you express\_\_\_\_\_, these are the actions that will be taken)
- Outline the deliverables that the coach is responsible for. (i.e. number of calls, one-on-ones, group meetings, etc. that are part of the coaching package along with the stated objectives and outcomes of the program).

- Non-disclosure agreements are unethical in helping professions. Clients must be free to publicly express their opinions about you and your program, whether good or bad.
- Not plagiarizing or using others' content without their permission.
- Issuing refunds

Refunds should be considered on a case-by-case basis. If a client expresses a viable concern for not completing the offering or they are in financial distress, the facilitator should consider refunding the cost of unused services minus fair administrative fees.

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# Acknowledgements

We want to extend our gratitude to all the dedicated individuals who have contributed to the development of this handbook. We sincerely appreciate those who have taken the time to provide feedback, share their experiences, and contribute to the ongoing refinement of this handbook.

This handbook is a testament to the collaborative spirit that defines our cause-driven initiative. We recognize that the coaching landscape is ever-evolving. As such, this handbook is not a static entity. It is a living, breathing document that will continually evolve as we incorporate new feedback, insights, and advancements.

Please do not hesitate to reach out should you have any questions, concerns, reflections, or feedback. We would also appreciate honest reviews from those who have read the handbook and wish to share their thoughts on our website. Reviews are an important way to maintain credibility and trust of this resource, and incentivize others to read and distribute it broadly. To submit a review, please email [admin@ethicsforcoaching.org](mailto:admin@ethicsforcoaching.org).