Ethical Framework for Technology-delivered Coaching

DeeAnna Merz Nagel, LMHC, CIHC, BCC; Ellen Neiley Ritter, Ph.D., BCC; Kate Anthony, DPsych

The Ethical Framework for the Use of Technology in Coaching was originally published in 2011. Now, eight years later, we offer this updated White Paper. Technology changes happen rapidly so realizing that, and knowing that more and more coaches are using technology to deliver services, this updated framework is both timely and necessary. Professional coaching organizations create and update codes of ethics but to date, these organizations have not incorporated the use of technology into the codes or guidelines to reflect best practice. This ethical framework is offered as a point of reference for governing bodies, certifying organizations, and the professional coaches these bodies and organizations represent.

A competent coach working online will always adhere to the following minimum standards and practices in order to be considered to be working in an ethical manner.

Coaches have a sufficient understanding of technology. Coaches who choose to deliver coaching services via technology will possess at least a basic understanding of technology as it relates to delivery of services, including but not limited to:

- Encryption: Coaches understand how to access encrypted services to store records and deliver communication.

- Password Protection: Coaches take further steps to ensure confidentiality of coaching communication and other materials by password protecting the computer, drives and stored files or communication websites.

- Firewalls: Coaches utilize firewall protection externally or through web-based programs.

- Virus Protection: Coaches protect work computers from viruses that can be received from or transmitted to others, including clients.

- Backup Systems: Records and data that are stored on the coach's hard drive are backed up either to an external drive or remotely via the Cloud.

- Hardware: Coaches understand the basic running platform of their work computer and know whether or not a client's hardware/platform is compatible with any communication programs the coach uses.

- Software: Coaches know how to download and operate software and assist clients with the same when necessary for the delivery of services.

- Third-party services: Coaches only utilize third-party services that offer an address and phone number so that contact is possible via means other than email. This offers a modicum of trust in the third-party utilized for such services as backup, storage, virus protection and communication.

Coaches using technology will make every effort to ensure the protection of their clients' privacy and confidentiality. This includes but is not limited to:

- Coaches will use email services which provide encryption and encourage their clients to do so.

- Coaches conducting their practice over the phone will use a telephonic system that reduces the chance of being overheard, ie. land lines over cell phones or encrypted Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP).

- Coaches will investigate the privacy policies of any chat or instant messenger program they may use with their clients and avoid those which do not protect confidentiality.

- Records storage can be hosted on a secure server with a third-party, stored on the coach's hard drive utilizing encrypted folders, or stored on an external drive that is safely stored.

ONLINE THERAPY INSTITUTE   HAVANA WELLNESS STUDIO   THE INSTITUTE FOR LIFE COACH TRAINING

Coaches display pertinent and necessary information on websites. Websites provide access to information for the general public, potential clients, clients and other professionals.

- **Coach Contact Information**: Coaches offer contact information that includes email, postal address, and a telephone or VOIP number. While it is not recommended that postal addresses reflect the coach's home location, clients should have a postal address for formal correspondence related to redress, subpoenas or other mailings requiring a signature of receipt. Coaches state the amount of time an individual may wait for a reply to email or voice mail. Best practice indicates a maximum of two business days for inquiries.

- **Coach Education**: Coaches list degrees, licenses and/or certifications and wherever possible, links supporting independent verification of certification and/or membership in a related professional organization should be provided. Coaches consider listing other formal education such as college or university courses, online continuing education and professional development courses, and conference/convention attendance directly related to coaching and technology.

- **Terms of Use and Privacy Policy:** The Terms of Use agreement and Privacy Policy documents are posted by the provider of the website and appear on websites used by the coach to promote and/ or deliver coaching services. These documents outline what the user of the website and associated services may expect with respect to the availability of the website and related web services, and how private information is collected, stored and protected. Coaches using a web-based coaching platform (website) or web service provided by a third-party provider will ensure that the Privacy Policy conforms to the privacy practice standards the coach is held to by the professional association or governing agencies operating within the geographic region in which coaching services are provided.

  - The Terms of Use agreement often appears in the footer of a website's homepage and outlines the conditions under which the provider of the website makes the site (not professional coaching services) available. The agreement is between the provider of the website (which may not be the coach) and the users of the website. It specifies what is expected with respect to the web site provider's provision of website availability and security, and the web site user's use of the website with respect to adherence to site policies regarding posting information and use of copyrighted or trademarked information and links to third party websites. It also often incudes a warranty and disclaimer regarding availability of the website.

  - The **Privacy Policy** often appears in the footer of a website's homepage and outlines how the provider of the website and the coach who may be using the website or web services to communicate, collects and protects personal information. It defines what type of personal information is collected, how it is collected, what is done with the information, how it is protected (encrypted), how it is managed by those engaged by the provider of the website service, what the user of the website service can do to protect personal information and who to contact regarding concerns about personal information. It also addresses, if applicable, how payments are securely processed, and should conform to the widely accepted standards that are in place within the geographic area where services are provided, such as the Fair Information Practice Principles in the US and the Data Protection Act in the UK.

  - Coaches must also be cognizant of laws regulating professional practices within their geographic jurisdiction, and in particular, the standards and practices governing how records are maintained and what privacy and security rules may apply. In some instances, coaches may also be a health care provider by way of employment, education, certification and/or licensure. A circumstance may arise in which a government regulated license or certification may supersede the role of coach, in effect, rendering the coach a health care provider. If that circumstance arises, the coach may need to follow pertinent laws and practice standards governing the use and disclosure of protected health information such as those ap-

plying to US health care providers under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) provisions as outlined by the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) act.

- **Crisis Intervention Information**: People may surf the Internet seeking immediate help and may misunderstand the kinds of services a coach provides. Coaches provide clear explanation as to the limitations of services provided and display crisis intervention information on the home page. Offering global resources such as Befriender's International or The Samaritans is the best course of action.

- Information concerning the nature of the professional coaching services provided by the coach to the client should be provided in a separate Coaching Agreement document which is then executed as a contract for coaching services. In addition, the Terms of Use agreement should reference an associated, yet separate, Privacy Policy to specify how personal information transmitted through the website is protected

Coaches work only within their Scope of Practice. Scope of Practice indicates the specific area to which a coach may practice.

- Coaches should have a professional affiliation which offers a code of ethics to which they comply.

- Coaches will always follow local and regional laws and ethical codes, as applicable.

- Coaches will accurately identify their coaching qualifications, expertise, training, experience, certifications, and credentials.

- Coaches maintain a reasonable level of awareness of current best business practices and professional information in their fields of activity and undertake ongoing efforts to maintain competence in the skills they use.

- Coaches understand and clearly communicate the distinction between coaching, consulting, psychotherapy, and other support professionals.

- Coaches understand and adhere to their responsibility to refer clients to other support professionals when indicated.

- Coaches will encourage their clients or sponsors to make a change if the coach believes the client or sponsor would be better served by another coach or by another resource.

- Coaches do not attempt to maintain simultaneous counseling and coaching relationships with clients even when properly qualified as a coach and licensed in another profession such as counseling.

- Coaches adhere to professional codes of conduct as published by internationally recognized professional coaching organizations.

- Coaches will recognize and honor the efforts and contributions of others and not misrepresent them as their own. Coaches understand that violating this standard may leave them subject to legal remedy by a third party.

- Coaches respect the specific laws of a potential client's geographic location. While coaching may not be a regulated field where the coach is located, coaching may be (or become) regulated in other parts of the world.

- Coaches will clearly spell out any limitations on confidentiality, as defined by the applicable Code of Ethics, state or geographical jurisdiction under which they practice on their website, within their Coaching Agreement, etc.

Coaches enter into a contractual agreement with the client to provide coaching services. Coaches will carefully review the Coaching Agreement with the coaching client and will strive to ensure that, prior to, or at the initial meeting, their coaching client and sponsors understand the nature of coaching, the nature and limits of confidentiality, financial arrangements, and any other terms of the coaching agreement including how coaching information will be exchanged among coach, client, and sponsor (the person contacting for and paying for coaching.) The coach or coaching organization will have the client sign the Coaching Agreement or Contract, and thereby enter into an agreement for coaching before proceeding.

Coaching Agreement: The process begins when the client contemplates accessing services. Therefore, clear and precise information concerning the nature of the coaching services proposed, how information is managed, etc. should be accessible via a document posted on the coach's website. The information in the Coaching Agreement includes:

- A clear description of coaching, which should include disclaimers as to what coaching is not (i.e. a substitute for therapy, legal advice, etc.).

- How web-enabled and associated telephonic and face-to-face coaching services, as available, will be provided and supported.

- A review of the pros and cons of online coaching including such disadvantages as lack of visual and auditory cues, the limitations of confidentiality via technology, and advantages that include easy scheduling, time management and the absence of transportation costs.

- How confidentiality is maintained, and personal information is protected: Clear explanation is provided regarded the use and limits of technology with respect to secure (encrypted) and unsecure (unencrypted) communications such as text/mobile messaging. Guidance is provided on which type of technology should be used for secure communications and which may be used for administrative tasks such as scheduling.

- The Coaching Agreement will also reference the aforementioned Privacy Policy outlining the standards and procedures that will be adhered to regarding data protection, storage, management, and transmission of protected health information. A statement identifying the coach as the owner of the coaching record including all transcripts, notes and emails, unless otherwise specified through law in the coach's geographic location or Code of Ethics, will also be provided. The client is informed that posting direct information about the coach or verbatim information from sessions is prohibited.

- Differentiate between online coaching services, tele-mental health services, crisis intervention services, etc.

- How to proceed during a technology breakdown: The client is informed about how to proceed if a technology breakdown occurs during a session, e.g. "If we disconnect, try to reconnect within 10 minutes. If reconnection is not possible, email or call to reschedule an appointment."

- Coaches are aware of their ethical responsibilities and have a clear understanding of online crisis intervention (suicidal/homicidial emails, texts, or voice mails in the middle of the night, threatening posts on social media/forums, etc.) and research local resources within the client's geographic area as emergency backup resources.

- How cultural specifics may impact treatment: Coaches discuss varying time zones, cultural differences and language barriers that may impact the delivery of services. Coaches should also ensure at, or prior to the start of coaching, that the client's expectations of the service being offered (such as the meaning of the term 'coaching' etc.) is sufficiently close to their own understanding and should take into account that different cultures around the world can have very different understandings of these matters.

- Coaches discuss with clients the expected boundaries and expectations about forming relationships online. Coaches inform clients that any requests for "friendship," business contacts, direct or @replies, blog responses or requests for a blog response within social media sites will be ignored to preserve the integrity of the coaching relationship and protect confidentiality. If the client has not been formally informed of these boundaries prior to the coach receiving the request, the coach will ignore the request via the social media site and explain why in subsequent interaction with the client. This must be consistent . . .and that such contact will not be construed as undue influence.

- Coaches will seek to avoid conflicts of interest and potential conflicts of interest and, if a conflict arises, openly disclose any such conflicts and offer to remove themselves and provide a referral when such a conflict arises.

Coaches conduct an initial interview and evaluate the client's ability to effectively engage in technology-enabled coaching. The initial interview and intake process begins with the potential client's first contact. The coach implements informal measures for screening a client's suitability for delivery of coaching services via technology.

- Client's Technology Skills: Coaches screen potential client's use of technology through questions at the outset. Questions include but are not limited to an inquiry about the client's experience with online culture e.g. email, chat rooms, forums, social networks, instant messaging, online purchasing, mobile texting, VOIP or telephones. Coaches ensure that the client's platform is compatible with the varying programs and platforms the coach may utilize during the course of coaching.

- Client's Language Skills: Coaches screen for language skills from the initial contact through the first few exchanges. Assessing for language barriers, reading and comprehension skills as well as cultural differences is part of the screening process. Text-based coaching may also involve screening for keyboarding proficiency.

- Client's Potential to Benefit from Coaching: Coach refers clients presenting with acute emotional distress or other symptoms of significant mental distress or disorder to appropriate mental health services.

Coaches seek out training, knowledge and mentoring and/or supervision. Training, knowledge and mentoring regarding coaching and technology are paramount to delivering services that are considered "best practice". Coaches are encouraged to demonstrate proficiency and competency through formal training for online work, consult books, peer-reviewed literature, and popular media. Coach and/or peer mentoring and support are highly recommended for all coaches. Coaches keep themselves informed of new technologies, practices, legal requirements and standards relevant to the coaching profession.

- Example Topics of study related to Training, Knowledge and Supervision include but are not limited to:

  - Online Coaching

  - Online Crisis Intervention best practice

  - Online Coaching Supervision and Online Peer Supervision

  - Ethics of Online Coaching

  - Avatar Coaching

  - Cybercoaching

  - Text-based Coaching

  - Telehealth & Distinctions

  - Tele-mental health & Distinctions

- Social Media Opportunity & Limitations

- Mixed Reality

- Online Relationship Dynamics

- Online Peer Support

- SMS Text Messaging

- Virtual Worlds (i.e. Second Life) and Virtual Reality

- Coaching and Technology

- Formal Training: Coaches seek out sufficient formal training whenever possible through college, university, accredited coaching institutes, or private settings, and any such training is accurately displayed on the coach's website.

- Informal Training: Coaches complete continuing education and professional development and conferences, conventions and workshops.

- Books: Coaches read professional books written by the general public and professionals credentialed in their field.

- Peer-reviewed Literature: Coaches read peer-reviewed literature that includes the latest theories and research.

- Popular Media: Coaches are informed through popular media such as magazines, newspapers, social networking sites, websites, television and movies, and understand the impact of coaching and technology on the popular culture.

- Coach/Peer Mentoring: Mentoring is often sought by coaches who deliver services via technology and can be delivered either face-to-face, over the phone, or via encrypted methods.

About the Authors

DeeAnna Merz Nagel, LMHC, CIHC, BCC is a counselor and coach educator. Among other topics, she teaches coaches about alternative approaches to health and wellness and how to deliver these services ethically, whether in-person or via distance technology. She is considered a thought leader on the delivery of online therapy and coaching and has published widely on these topics.

DeeAnna is a Certified International Health Coach (CIHC) through the International Association for Health Coaches, and a Board Certified Coach (BCC) with Wellness designation through the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE). She is a member of the International Association of Coaching (IAC) and holds the Masteries Practitioner Coach (MPC) credential. As well as her coaching credentials, she is also a Licensed Mental Health Counselor. She teaches in-person and online through the Havana Wellness Studio, Online Therapy Institute and as faculty at The Institute for Life Coach Training (ILCT).

Ellen Neiley Ritter, Ph.D. BCC is the Dean of Students at The Institute for Life Coach Training. After completing a Ph.D. in Psychology, she realized that she no longer wanted to focus on what's wrong with individuals, preferring the strength-based approach of coaching. After completing her training at ILCT, Ellen was credentialed as Certified Life Coach, and as a Board Certified Coach by the Center for Credentialing and Education. Ellen served as a member of the Global Convention of Coaching's committee on Research in Coaching, is a member of International Coach Federation [ICF],and has served on various committees with the Association of Coach Training Organizations [ACTO].

ONLINE THERAPY INSTITUTE   HAVANA WELLNESS STUDIO   THE INSTITUTE FOR LIFE COACH TRAINING

Kate Anthony, DPsych, FBACP is the leading UK expert on the use of technology in therapeutic and coaching practices. She is a psychotherapist,, supervisor, trainer and consultant. Kate has trained practitioners and organizations worldwide in online therapy, coaching and related fields for over 15 years, with both her online training courses and offline workshops and lectures. She consults with the BACP regarding UK progress in the e-coaching field and in particular the BACP Coaching Division, as well as contributing to Coaching Today, the UK Coaching Journal.

She is co-editor and co-author of five textbooks on the field as well as numerous articles, chapters and journal symposiums, and several Ethical Frameworks for the use of technology in mental health. She was made Fellow of BACP for her work in 2008 and is also Past-President and Fellow of the International Society for Mental Health Online. She is co-founder of the [Online Therapy Institute](#)*, lives on a widebeam barge on the Grand Union Canal in London, and is a double Stroke survivor.*

References

Anthony, K. & Nagel, D (2012). A Brave New World: Coaching Online. *Coaching Today*. BACP Publications, Lutterworth. PP33-37, Issue 1.

Anthony, K. & Nagel, D.M. (2010). *Online therapy: A practical guide*. Sage Publishing: London.

Goss, S, (2011). Research review: Online coaching research, the future is bright! *Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology*. 1(4), 14-17.

Labardee, L., Nagel, D.M. & Anthony, K. (2011). "An Ethical Framework for the Use of Technology in Coaching". *Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology*, Vol 1 (4): 20-28

Nagel, D. & Anthony, K. (2013). Adapting the masteries to best practices established in the delivery of coaching services online: Mastery 1. *VOICE* October. International Association of Coaching.

Nagel, D.M., Anthony, K. & Louw, G. (2012). Cyberspace as culture: A new paradigm for therapists and coaches. *Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology*. 2(4), 24-35.

Williams, P. (2009). Online Coaching: The next step in technology and client service. *Choice Magazine*. ICF. Volume 7, Issue 4, pp. 21-23.

Wysocki, Y. (2011). Online coaching and developing relationships. Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology. 1(4), 9-13.

Citation

Nagel, D.M., Ritter, E.N. & Anthony, K. The Institute for Life Coach Training (2019). *Ethical framework for technology-delivered coaching.*

Retrieved from https://www.lifecoachtraining.com/downloads/techcoaching.pdf on

Ethical Codes for Coaches

Center for Credentialing and Education, available [here](#)

International Association of Coaching, available [here](#)

International Coach Federation, available [here](#)

ONLINE THERAPY INSTITUTE   HAVANA WELLNESS STUDIO   THE INSTITUTE FOR LIFE COACH TRAINING