A FREE FIELD GUIDE FOR COACHES

Five Conversations That Look Alike

Coaching, mentor coaching, coaching supervision, therapy and mentoring — what truly sets them apart

Daniela Aneva · ICF MCC · ICF Mentor Coach Specialization · ICF Coaching Supervisor Specialization · EMCC ESIA · October 2026

From the outside, all five of these relationships look almost identical: two people (or a small group) sitting together, one asking questions and listening, the other thinking out loud about something that matters. Yet each has a different purpose, a different contract, a different set of ethics and a different idea of who the expert in the room is. When we blur them, clients get the wrong kind of help, coaches drift beyond their competence, and the profession loses some of the trust it has worked hard to earn.

This guide sets the five side by side so that you can recognise in a moment which conversation you are in, which one your client actually needs, and when it is time to change the contract or refer on. The comparison draws on the current standards of the International Coaching Federation (ICF), the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), the ICF referral guidelines on therapy, and the classic supervision literature. It also reflects the ICF changes announced in 2026 that reshape mentor coaching and coaching supervision from January 2027.

The short version

Coaching grows the client. **Mentor coaching** grows the coach's skill. **Coaching supervision** grows and safeguards the whole coach and, through them, their clients. **Therapy** heals what hurts. **Mentoring** hands on what someone has already learned.

© 2026 Daniela Aneva · All rights reserved · danielaaneva.com · daniela@danielaaneva.com

1. At a glance

Start here. If you only remember one row, make it the central question, because it tells you instantly which conversation you are having.

	Coaching	Mentor Coaching	Coaching Supervision	Therapy	Mentoring
In one sentence	A thinking partnership that helps a client get clear on what they want and discover their own way of getting there.	Competency-based coaching and feedback on a coach's real sessions, designed to strengthen their skill against the ICF Core Competencies.	A reflective space where a practising coach examines their work, themselves and the wider system, so they grow, stay ethical and stay resourced.	A clinical relationship in which a licensed professional assesses, may diagnose, and treats psychological distress or dysfunction.	A developmental relationship in which someone more experienced shares knowledge, perspective and doors opened along their own path.
Who it serves	Individuals, leaders and teams who want growth, change or better performance.	Coaches preparing for an ICF credential or renewal, or simply wanting sharper skill.	Practising coaches at every stage, as well as mentor coaches and supervisors themselves.	People experiencing emotional, psychological or relational difficulty, including diagnosable conditions.	People earlier in a career, profession or organisation who want to learn from someone further along.
The central question	Where do you want to go, and what will move you there?	How fully does your coaching show the competencies, and what would make it stronger?	What is happening in your work, in you and around you, and what does that ask of you now?	What is causing this pain, and how can it heal?	Here is what I learned on this road. What will you take from it?
The practitioner, in a word	Partner	Developer and observer	Reflective companion and guardian of standards	Clinician	Guide and role model

2. Purpose and focus

The clearest difference between the five lies in what is being worked on. In coaching the subject is the client's life or work; in mentor coaching and supervision the subject is the coach; in therapy it is the person's psychological health; in mentoring it is the transfer of experience.

	Coaching	Mentor Coaching	Coaching Supervision	Therapy	Mentoring
Primary focus	The client's goals, awareness, choices and actions.	The coach's coaching skills as they show up in recorded or observed sessions.	The whole coach: practice, ethics, client relationships, reactions, well-being and the systems the work sits in.	Mental health, emotional healing, symptoms and patterns that impair functioning.	Career, professional know-how, organisational navigation and networks.

© 2026 Daniela Aneva · All rights reserved · danielaaneva.com · daniela@danielaaneva.com

	Coaching	Mentor Coaching	Coaching Supervision	Therapy	Mentoring
Time orientation	Present moving into the future.	Present, anchored in specific sessions.	Looks back at work already done in order to move forward wiser.	Past, present and future; often explores where patterns began.	Future, informed by the mentor's past.
Who sets the agenda	The client, within the coaching agreement (and with sponsor input in organisational coaching).	Shared, framed by the ICF competencies and the target credential level.	The supervisee brings the material; the scope is shaped together in the supervision contract.	The therapist leads a treatment plan, developed collaboratively with the client.	Usually the mentee, though the mentor's experience strongly shapes the direction.
How the client arrives	Resourceful, whole and functioning; seeking more.	A trained coach building toward mastery.	A practitioner wanting reflection, perspective and support.	Often in distress, or struggling to function in daily life.	Newer to the field and eager to learn from lived experience.
Typical outcomes	Clarity, new behaviour, goals achieved, leadership growth.	Stronger competencies and credential readiness.	Deeper self-awareness, ethical confidence, better client outcomes, resilience.	Symptom relief, healing, restored functioning.	Knowledge, confidence, career progression and a wider network.

3. The relationship and the practitioner's stance

Here the line between coaching and mentoring becomes visible. A coach trusts the client's thinking and offers advice rarely, if ever; a mentor is chosen precisely because their advice is worth hearing. Mentor coaching and supervision sit in between, each in its own way.

	Coaching	Mentor Coaching	Coaching Supervision	Therapy	Mentoring
Stance	Non-directive. Evokes the client's own thinking and resources.	Coaching stance combined with specific, evidence-based feedback on observed behaviour.	Collaborative and reflective; may offer perspective, challenge and, when needed, guidance.	Clinical; interventions follow a recognised therapeutic method.	Openly directive at times; shares advice, opinions and stories.
Use of the practitioner's own expertise	Expertise in process, not content. Advice is not the default.	Expertise in the competencies and credential standards.	Broad expertise in coaching practice, ethics, psychology and systems.	Diagnostic and therapeutic expertise, grounded in clinical training.	Content expertise is the whole point.

© 2026 Daniela Aneva · All rights reserved · danielaaneva.com · daniela@danielaaneva.com ·

	Coaching	Mentor Coaching	Coaching Supervision	Therapy	Mentoring
Is anyone evaluated?	No.	Yes. The coach's skill is assessed against ICF credential markers; from 2027 the mentor coach also validates competence for Portfolio applicants.	Developmental rather than pass or fail, although supervisors may be asked for references in some accreditation routes.	Yes, through clinical assessment and, where appropriate, diagnosis.	Only informally.
Shape of the relationship	Equal partnership.	Peer-like, with an evaluative element.	Collaborative, with the supervisor holding a duty to the profession and to the coach's clients.	Professional and client, with a legal duty of care.	A gradient of experience, often within the same organisation or field.

4. Structure and practice

	Coaching	Mentor Coaching	Coaching Supervision	Therapy	Mentoring
Typical format	One-to-one, team or group sessions, usually 45 to 90 minutes.	One-to-one and group sessions built around recordings, transcripts or live observation.	One-to-one, group or peer supervision.	Individual, couple, family or group sessions, often around 50 minutes.	Meetings, shadowing, informal conversations and introductions.
Length and rhythm	Often three to twelve months or an agreed number of sessions.	For an ICF credential: at least 10 hours spread over at least three months.	Ongoing throughout a coaching career, commonly monthly or quarterly.	From brief work of a few sessions to long-term treatment, frequently weekly.	Months to years; sometimes a lifelong bond.
Contracting	Coaching agreement; a three-way contract when an organisation sponsors.	Agreement covering hours, recordings, client consent, feedback and documentation.	Supervision contract covering scope, confidentiality, boundaries and what happens if an ethical concern arises.	Informed consent and a treatment plan.	Often informal; structured programmes use a mentoring agreement.
Confidentiality	Set by the ICF Code of Ethics and the agreement; in most places it carries no legal privilege.	Confidential; any client recording requires that client's consent.	Confidential, with client identities protected and the limits agreed upfront.	Protected by law (for example HIPAA in the US), with mandated-reporting and duty-to-warn exceptions.	By agreement between the two people.
Who pays	The individual or a sponsoring organisation.	The coach, or it is included in an accredited training programme.	The coach or their employer; group supervision lowers the cost.	The client privately, or through health insurance.	Frequently unpaid, or part of an organisational programme.

© 2026 Daniela Aneva · All rights reserved · danielaaneva.com · daniela@danielaaneva.com ·

5. Standards, qualifications and regulation

Only one of the five is regulated by law. The other four rely on professional bodies, ethical codes and voluntary credentials, which is exactly why clear distinctions matter so much.

	Coaching	Mentor Coaching	Coaching Supervision	Therapy	Mentoring
Professional standards	ICF Core Competencies (eight) and ICF Code of Ethics; EMCC Competence Framework; Association for Coaching standards.	ICF Mentor Coaching Competencies (2024) alongside the ICF Core Competencies.	ICF Coaching Supervision Competencies (eight); EMCC and Association for Coaching supervision standards.	State or national licensing law; bodies such as the APA, ACA and NASW in the US; clinical guidelines.	Organisational programme standards; EMCC (which covers mentoring); International Mentoring Association.
What the practitioner needs	No legal requirement. Voluntary credentials such as ICF ACC, PCC, MCC or EMCC EIA signal training and experience.	An ICF credential at or above the candidate's level. From 1 January 2027, the ICF Mentor Coach Specialization (MCS), which requires at least 41 hours of mentor coaching education on the standard path.	ICF strongly encourages dedicated supervision training. The ICF Coaching Supervisor Specialization (CSS) requires at least 41 hours of supervision training; EMCC offers the ESIA.	A graduate degree, supervised clinical hours and a professional licence.	Relevant experience in the field. Mentor training is helpful but optional.
Regulated by law?	No. Self-regulated profession.	No.	No.	Yes.	No.
Role in ICF credentialing	Client coaching hours count toward the experience requirement.	Required for every ICF credential and every ACC renewal: 10 hours, at least 3 of them individual and up to 7 in a group. Only interactive feedback time counts. Supervision cannot replace it.	Not required for ACC, PCC or MCC. Up to 10 hours (receiving or delivering) can count as continuing education for renewal. At least 5 hours are required for the ICF ACTC team coaching credential.	Not applicable.	Not applicable. General mentoring does not count as ICF mentor coaching.

6. The pair coaches confuse most: mentor coaching and coaching supervision

Both happen between coaches. Both use reflection and feedback. Both now carry an ICF specialization. And yet they answer different needs. Mentor coaching is narrow by design: ICF describes it as coaching on coaching skills specifically, not on practice building, life balance or anything else. Supervision is wide by design: it holds the coach's work, the coach as a person, the client relationship and the organisational system all at once.

© 2026 Daniela Aneva · All rights reserved

Supervision literature describes three functions, first named in social work by Kadushin as educative, supportive and managerial, and later framed by Proctor as **formative** (learning and development), **restorative** (looking after the practitioner's well-being) and **normative** (quality, standards and ethics). Mentor coaching lives almost entirely in the formative function. Supervision deliberately moves between all three.

	Mentor Coaching	Coaching Supervision
The lens	Competencies. How well does the coaching demonstrate the ICF markers?	The whole coach. What is happening in the work, in me and in the system?
What is brought	Recordings, transcripts or live sessions.	Anything from practice: a stuck client, an ethical dilemma, a strong personal reaction, contracting with a sponsor, boundaries, business questions, fatigue.
Functions served	Mainly formative.	Formative, restorative and normative.
Type of feedback	Specific behavioural evidence tied to competency markers and credential level.	Reflective inquiry, alternative perspectives, attention to parallel process and blind spots.
When it ends	When the credential requirement or the skill goal is met.	It doesn't, really. It is part of ongoing professional practice.
ICF qualification from 2027	Mentor Coach Specialization (MCS), at ACC, PCC or MCC level.	Coaching Supervisor Specialization (CSS); CSS holders can support ACTC candidates.
Can one replace the other?	No. ICF accepts only mentor coaching toward the mentor coaching requirement.	No. Supervision complements mentor coaching and can count toward renewal education.

> ### A way to hold the difference
>
> Mentor coaching tunes the instrument. Supervision cares for the musician, listens to the music they are making with each client, and keeps an eye on the hall they are playing in.

7. Coaching and therapy: knowing where the line is

Coaching can feel therapeutic, and good coaching often brings emotional relief. That does not make it therapy. Coaching assumes a functioning, resourceful client and works forward toward what they want. Therapy is a licensed, regulated health service that can assess, diagnose and treat, and it is equipped to work with trauma, crisis and impairment. ICF treats referral as a normal part of the coaching process rather than a failure of it: when a client's needs go beyond what coaching can offer, the coach names what they see, explores options with the client, and together they decide whether to pause, continue alongside therapy, or end the coaching.

© 2026 Daniela Aneva · All rights reserved · danielaaneva.com · daniela@danielaaneva.com ·

Coaches who are also trained therapists carry a particular responsibility here. Dual training does not merge the two contracts. Be explicit with the client about which one you are working under, and keep the boundary visible in your supervision.

What you notice	What it may point to	What to do
Persistent low mood, hopelessness or anxiety that is affecting work, sleep or relationships	A mental health need beyond the scope of coaching	Name it gently, share your observation, discuss a referral to a licensed professional, and agree together how coaching will proceed.
Any mention of self-harm, suicide or harming others	A safety concern that takes priority over everything else	Stop the coaching agenda. Make sure the person is safe and connected to immediate help (in the US, the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline; elsewhere, local emergency services).
Trauma memories, flashbacks or overwhelming emotion dominating sessions	Unprocessed trauma	Do not explore the trauma. Refer to a trauma-informed therapist and agree a clear boundary for any continuing coaching.
Substance use or other compulsive behaviour harming daily life	Addiction or a clinical pattern	Refer to specialist support; coaching may resume or continue alongside once there is clinical care in place.
Repeated lack of progress despite real commitment, rooted in emotional barriers	Material better held in therapy	Explore it openly with the client, consider a referral, and bring the case to supervision.
The client asks for a diagnosis or about medication	A clinical request	Be clear that this sits outside coaching and point them toward a qualified clinician.

8. Coaching and mentoring: two kinds of wisdom

Mentoring rests on the mentor's experience; coaching rests on the client's. A mentor is valuable because they have walked the path and can say, "Here is what worked for me, here is who you should meet, here is the mistake to avoid." A coach is valuable because they help the client find answers that fit their own life, often in territory the coach has never walked. Mentoring tends to be longer, looser and more relational, and frequently happens inside an organisation or profession. Coaching is more structured, contracted and focused on agreed outcomes.

Many skilled practitioners move between the two within one relationship. That is perfectly acceptable, provided the shift is transparent. A simple "Would it help if I took my coaching hat off for a moment and shared my own experience?" keeps the client in charge of the conversation they are having.

9. Which conversation is needed? A quick decision guide

If the need sounds like...	The right fit is	Why
"I want to reach a goal, lead better, or make a change in my life or work."	Coaching	The client is resourceful and the answers are theirs to find.

© 2026 Daniela Aneva · All rights reserved · danielaaneva.com · daniela@danielaaneva.com ·

If the need sounds like...	The right fit is	Why
"I need my ICF credential, or I want to know how my coaching measures up."	Mentor coaching	The focus is competency, with observation and feedback.
"A client situation is staying with me. I'm not sure what's ethical here. I feel drained by this work."	Coaching supervision	The whole coach, the client and the system all need attention.
"I'm struggling emotionally and it's affecting my daily life."	Therapy	This calls for clinical assessment and treatment.
"I want to learn from someone who has already done what I'm trying to do."	Mentoring	Experience, advice and access are what's being sought.

10. What changes in 2027

ICF updates every coach should know

From **1 January 2027**, every ICF credential candidate (ACC, PCC and MCC) must complete any new mentor coaching hours with a mentor coach who holds the **Mentor Coach Specialization (MCS)**. Mentor coaches who want to keep serving credential candidates need the MCS by that date.

From **1 April 2027**, the recorded performance evaluation is retired for ACC and PCC Portfolio applicants. In its place, an MCS mentor coach observes at least three of the candidate's coaching sessions over a minimum of three months (with at least three hours of individual mentor coaching) and completes a Competency Review Form that is submitted with the application. MCC candidates keep the performance evaluation.

The **Coaching Supervisor Specialization (CSS)**, opened for applications in September 2026, formally recognises coaching supervision as a distinct advanced practice with its own competency framework. CSS holders can support ICF ACTC team coaching candidates and coaches using supervision toward renewal.

Taken together, these changes give mentor coaching a far more central role in assessment, and give supervision a clearer professional identity. They also make it more important than ever to know which of the two you are offering and which one a coach in front of you actually needs.

© 2026 Daniela Aneva · All rights reserved · danielaaneva.com · daniela@danielaaneva.com ·

About the author

Daniela Aneva, MCC

Daniela Aneva is the founder and CEO of MentorsPro and an ICF Master Certified Coach who holds the ICF Mentor Coach Specialization, the ICF Coaching Supervisor Specialization and the EMCC ESIA supervision accreditation. She is co-founder of EMCC USA, one of the leaders of the ICF Community of Practice for Coaching Supervision, and author of Schemas in Leadership, The Anatomy of Panic and Schemas in Coaching Supervision. She trains, mentors and supervises coaches around the world.

Want to talk about supervision or mentor coaching? Book a free 15-minute call at calendly.com/daniela-aneva/15min, join one of the free open houses at danielaaneva.com/open-houses, or simply write to me.

Email: daniela@danielaaneva.com · **Phone:** +1 201-753-6161 · **Web:** danielaaneva.com · www.mentorspro.co · **Organisations:** info@mentorspro.co

© 2026 Daniela Aneva, MentorsPro LLC. All rights reserved. This guide is the original work and intellectual property of Daniela Aneva. You are welcome to share it in full and unchanged, with credit to the author. It may not be edited, sold, rebranded, used in paid training materials or reproduced in part without written permission from daniela@danielaaneva.com.

Sources

International Coaching Federation. Coaching Supervision. coachingfederation.org/coaching-supervision

International Coaching Federation. ICF Coaching Supervision Competencies. coachingfederation.org/credentials-and-standards/core-competencies/coaching-supervision

International Coaching Federation. Mentor Coaching FAQ. coachingfederation.org/blog/grandchild_category_faq_2/mentor-coaching

International Coaching Federation. Credentialing FAQ. coachingfederation.org/legacy-faq-categories/credentialing

International Coaching Federation (2026). ACC and PCC Performance Evaluation to Be Replaced by Enhanced Mentor Coaching Requirement. coachingfederation.org/blog/mentor-coaching-requirement-replacing-acc-pcc-performance-evaluations

International Coaching Federation (2026). ICF Launches New Specializations for Mentor Coaching and Coaching Supervision. coachingfederation.org/blog/icf-launches-new-specializations-for-mentor-coaching-and-coaching-supervision

International Coaching Federation. ICF Specializations Overview (MCS, CSS, ACTC). coachingfederation.org/credentialing/icf-specializations-overview

International Coaching Federation (2018). Referring a Client to Therapy: A Set of Guidelines. coachfederation.org/app/uploads/2018/05/Whitepaper-Client-Referral.pdf

European Mentoring and Coaching Council. Supervision Definition. emccglobal.org/quality/supervision/definition

Clutterbuck, D. A Short Guide to Group Supervision in Coaching. Coaching and Mentoring International.

Kadushin, A. (1976). Supervision in Social Work. Columbia University Press.

Proctor, B. (1988). Supervision: A co-operative exercise in accountability. In Marken & Payne (eds.), Enabling and Ensuring.