

# The heroix of the story

a coach-therapist's  
energy quest



# Coach, therapist and supervisor **Ruth Galloway-Kirkland** is curious about the difference in energy levels she experiences after counselling and coaching, and embarks on a quest to explore why this might be

*Author note: I intersperse the gendered and gender-neutral terms hero/heroine/heroix throughout this article*

**D**o you find a difference in your energy levels after counselling sessions and coaching sessions? I can feel heavy, reflective, sleepy, tired, and at times exhausted, after counselling sessions. In contrast, after most coaching sessions, I feel excited, energised, lively, wakeful, and more upbeat. Having always experienced this difference in energetic responses after counselling and coaching sessions, I am curious about why this is.

When thinking about this issue, and about the client relationships I make, I have found it most helpful to consider the metaphor of a quest, whether that is within coaching or counselling. Tales of quests feature prominently in the folklore of all nations.<sup>1</sup> Think about your favourite books as a child, and the heroes within them; for example, in Greek mythology, or Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*<sup>2</sup>, or Qvothe in *The Name of the Wind*.<sup>3</sup>

Quests require great exertion on the part of the hero who must overcome obstacles and challenges, and take a journey toward a specific mission or a goal as part of it. Journeying allows the showcasing and description of different locations and scenarios, and there is always a lesson or moral to be learned.

There are often 'side-quests' – smaller challenges that deviate the heroix from their main quest path. The story often centres on the changed character of the heroix once the quest has been completed.

## The quest in our client work

In this metaphor, our client is the heroix of their own quest story – their quest being the therapeutic or coaching journey with us. For a counselling client, the goal of their quest may be relief from anxiety and distress, freedom from flashbacks, or learning coping skills to regulate their emotional responses more effectively. For a coaching client, their quest goal may be moving into a new role, executing a new corporate strategy, or managing change in their business.

In these quests, our clients, the heroes, exert lots of emotional, and sometimes physical energy, to move towards their goals, and their 'journey' is all of the material they choose to share with us in sessions. Our clients' journeys take them through the landscapes in which they live, work, or interact with their loved ones and acquaintances.

As a coach and/or therapist, we have the privilege of being a fellow traveller with our clients while they are on their journey. Journeying with our clients takes us to the locations that are significant for them, and in each location, there is usually a challenge to be faced, and won. These are unique to every individual we work with.

In therapy, those 'challenges' may be processing trauma, having difficult experiences or memories witnessed by another, freeing themselves from shame, or being able to express anger or hurt that has been bottled up for a long time.

In coaching, the 'challenge' may be taking a bold, or tentative, step towards their goal; it may be working with imposter syndrome, navigating board relationships, or strategising for growth.

## Quest gifts

In a quest, the hero usually receives gifts to help them on their journey. Consider the Cloak of Invisibility in the *Harry Potter*<sup>4</sup> stories, and Frodo's phial with the Light of Eärendil from *The Lord of the Rings*<sup>5</sup> as examples of these.

Our gifts to our clients are not necessarily tangible items; rather, they can include:

- our care
- our safe, reliable and consistent presence
- our compassion
- our unconditional positive regard
- our willingness to witness the client's experiences
- our non-judgment
- tools and coping strategies to support client emotional regulation, or movements towards goals (breathing exercises/visualisations/grounding techniques)
- coaching tools and techniques.

And last but certainly not least, the 'L'-word – love – because I don't think we can offer any of the above without an authentic and true love for this work, and for the clients we serve.

Offering these gifts can be tiring in a wonderful way, because we are making ourselves fully available to that person. Masson<sup>6</sup> argues that this availability, usually for 50 minutes in the therapeutic world (or longer in a coaching session): *'...appears to be genuine only because the circumstances of therapy are artificial. Precisely because the client is seen for only a limited time ... the therapist is ... able to suspend his judgment. In fact, the therapist is not a real person with the client, for if he were, he would have the same reactions he would have with people in his real life, which certainly do not include "unconditional acceptance," lack of judging, or real empathic understanding'* (p40).

So, given this, the energy required for us to maintain unconditional acceptance and non-judgment could be part of the reason for the fatigue we may feel post-session.



## Side-quests

However, in this article, we are exploring why coaching often feels less tiring than counselling. Perhaps the journey of counselling is so exhausting because, usually, it is a much longer one. By that, I don't necessarily mean the length of the contract we make to work together with our clients, rather, I'm referring to the *side-quests*.

Side-quests are the deviations the heroes take from the main path towards the goal. Consider the labyrinth as an example of a side-quest, in the Greek myth of Theseus<sup>7</sup> where he slays the Minotaur, a creature who is half-man, half-bull.

In our therapy work, these side-quests can take us to the very deepest and darkest of places, where 'monsters' reside, and fierce battles have to be fought and won by our clients. As practitioners, to make ourselves utterly and completely available to our clients, we become the instrument that resonates with our client's frequency. With this resonance comes fatigue when our clients are in those deep, dark places, fighting their 'monsters'.

We feel our clients' pain, we witness their fears and tears, we are alongside them, facilitating them to process trauma, and we are introduced, often in graphic detail, to their 'monsters'. We can 'meet' terrifying perpetrators, and we observe the metaphorical battles that can ensue between them and our clients within our sessions. We can be *with* our clients during this process, yet we cannot fight for them. This witnessing, which can be experienced as *powerless* for the therapist-observer, yet *powerful* for the client, to be witnessed, can be exhausting for practitioner and client alike. We observe, witness, feel, and support our clients to process and heal their traumatic experiences.

## Energetic attunement

It is interesting to note that people usually refer for counselling during, or just after, a crisis. It is more unusual for a person to refer for therapy when things are going really well. During or after a crisis, our nervous systems need safety, calm, down-regulation, and gentle pacing. As therapists, we sense into and attune to a slower energetic resonance, we model effective self-regulation and thus teach it to our clients, and we remind our client that their body and mind can be peaceful, still and calm.

For our practitioner-selves, this takes energy, and can contribute to our experience of fatigue. All of this *feeling* we do comes at an energetic cost to us, especially where we do it in such a way so as not to impinge on our client's process – the wisdom is *within them*, and we are merely supporting them to find their own way towards that wisdom.

People refer (or are referred to) coaching when a change or an improvement has to be made: where there is readiness to leap, take a plunge, take risks, or doing the 'thing' – whatever that 'thing' may be. As coaches we attune to the dynamism, the flux, and we work with our client to *potentiate* the space, to make it powerful and effective.

Perhaps it is this rather different harnessing and harvesting of energy by practitioners that can contribute to an often uplifted experience after a coaching session?

Can there be *more* meta-therapeutic non-directivity as well as *actual* directivity, within the coaching relationships we make, as opposed to the therapeutic ones?

Cooper<sup>8</sup> states that meta-therapeutic non-directivity is: *'... also a form of trusting the client's own process of self-determination, but this time in terms of what they might want from therapy itself: that is, at a meta-therapeutic level. So, when the therapist is being non-directive at the meta-therapeutic level, one option might be to work in a therapeutically non-directive way. But there could be other options... depending on what the client wants and what the therapist is skilled in and able to offer. For instance, if a client wanted to learn a particular mindfulness technique, or if they wanted advice on a relationship problem, the therapist might input on these areas if they know how to. This wouldn't, then, be therapeutic non-directivity, but it would still be non-directive at the meta-therapeutic level as it's trusting that the client knows what is best for them.'*

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Perhaps, and additionally due to the nature of coaching and mentoring, there is the possibility of practitioners having more directivity than in a counselling relationship. Often, our coachees or mentees may seek us out precisely *because* of the work experiences we have had, with a view to learning practical skills, techniques and tools that they can take into their workplace. As practitioners, can we feel more empowered in this role? Do we feel more energised? More valued?

Do we find, as coaches, that we disclose more of ourselves to our coaching clients than to our therapy clients? Does it impact on our sense of self, and the energy it takes to hold ourselves in the space, if we can be more congruent, where (clinically) appropriate?

At times, punctuated within therapeutic work (often towards the ending phase of the work), and in coaching work, we share our clients' joy and hopefulness, we experience pride, we tingle with excitement, we can become bathed in happiness, feel admiration for their courage, and so on. I am so often humbled by the experiences of my clients, and how they have found innovative and remarkable ways to cope with the most complex and difficult situations.

The experience of joy, pride, happiness, hopefulness and admiration has a different experiential quality to the experience of pain, fear, trauma and powerlessness. Think about the

somatic experiencing of these different emotions – undoubtedly these will be impacting and influencing our perceived bodily sensations after our sessions.

### Changed character of the heroine

The outcome of the quest focuses on the changed character of the heroine. We need only think of the feedback we receive from our clients to imagine what this may mean for them. It could be having more confidence or self-esteem, applying for the promotion that previously felt out of reach, being able to manage distressing memories, or stepping into a leadership role where they mentor others.

I also believe *our* character is subtly influenced and changed as a consequence of each relationship we have with a client, and perhaps this is the quest-gift to us, of having had the privilege to be on the journey with our clients. We grow, expand and evolve as practitioners, and we weave that therapeutic or coaching relationship into our tapestry of professional experience, and it enriches us.

### Dual-skilled practitioners and self-care

Due to the skills and experience that come directly from our therapeutic trainings, dual-skilled practitioners believe that:

- we can 'hold' our clients *and* they can be strong
- our clients can be both hopeful *and* traumatised
- we can consider safeguarding risks, *and* see that our clients have resilience and can cope
- our clients can experience mental health issues *and* still be goal-oriented and future focused.

This does not mean that a therapy client will receive coaching, nor that a coaching client will receive therapy – our own way of working and our bounded contracting process will make that clear for each of us, but it does mean we can hold whatever, and *all*, of what a client can bring to the space. Dual-skilled practitioners are trained to see beneath the layers of communication, to detect unseen and unconscious patterns, to resonate with the feelings and energy of our clients, and this allows us to work with them in a truly holistic way. We can extend our complete attention and hear and witness all our clients have to say.

The key to managing expectations, and our own energy levels, as in all we do for both client and practitioner, is effective contracting.

- Do we deliver what we say we will?
- Are we slipping into spaces that we have not contracted for with our clients?
- Are we moving our clients off and away from *their* quest path? If we have, how do we manage it?
- Is this impacting our energy or fatigue?

As practitioners, *our* tiredness and fatigue are best supported by excellent, and frequent, supervision, where we have space to explore and disentangle from our clients' feelings. As therapists, as well as coaches, we know and recognise the value of the dynamic, collaborative space that is supervision, in which to think about, and *feel*, our client work. I have observed that we will often engage with coaching

supervision more frequently than some of our colleagues who just practise coaching.

Supervision is where we keep our clients' best interests at the forefront of our discussion but also where we can recognise and acknowledge our feelings and responses to the narratives we hear from those we work with. Excellent supervision will support us to be courageous in our client work, while gently challenging us in this too. Supervision is a space of growth and transformation, which feels fitting for our own quest journeys!

We rejuvenate, and recharge our energy with good self-care – however this looks for each of us. It is helpful for us to remember that we too are on our own quest, and to gently reframe our experiences to be self-compassionate when we recognise the fatigue, because we know it's there for a good cause. ■

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ruth Galloway-Kirkland** is a coach, supervisor and therapist, working especially well with founders, entrepreneurs and clients who are neurodiverse. She has extensive experience in supporting clients with addictions, trauma and sleep difficulties. From January 2024 she is launching a closed supervision group, with Caroline Anthony, for coaches working with neurodiverse clients.

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