The Art of the Coaching Mindset

Embodies a Coaching Mindset in ICF-Aligned Coaching

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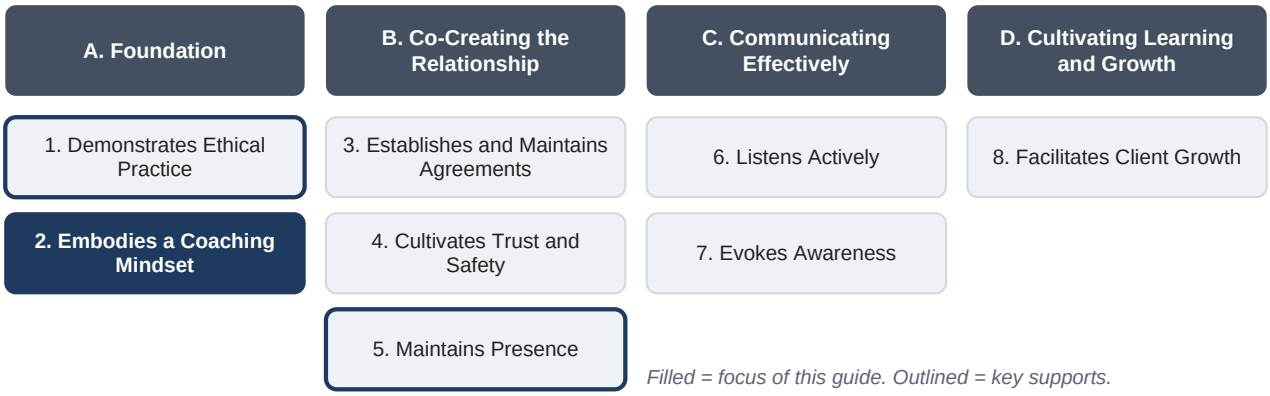
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About This Guide

In ICF-aligned coaching, Embodies a Coaching Mindset is Core Competency 2. It means developing and maintaining a way of being that is open, curious, flexible and client-centered. Before any technique, the coach brings a stance: respect for the client as the one who makes their own choices, and a commitment to the coach's own learning, reflection and care.

This guide organizes the competency into ten areas. Each has subcategories with sample questions and phrases to adapt in your own words, plus diagrams, tables and worksheets. It is a map, not a script: a mindset cannot be performed, only cultivated.

Where the coaching mindset fits in the ICF model



The eight ICF Core Competencies (2019 model). The coaching mindset is Competency 2, in the foundation domain with ethical practice.

What the competency asks of the coach

In plain words (paraphrased from the ICF model)	Where in this guide
Acknowledges that clients are responsible for their own choices	Areas 2 and 3
Engages in ongoing learning and development as a coach	Area 9
Develops an ongoing reflective practice to improve their coaching	Area 8
Stays aware of, and open to, the influence of context and culture on self and others	Area 5
Uses awareness of self and intuition to benefit clients	Area 4
Develops and maintains the ability to regulate their emotions	Area 6
Prepares mentally and emotionally for sessions	Area 7
Seeks help from outside sources when necessary	Area 10

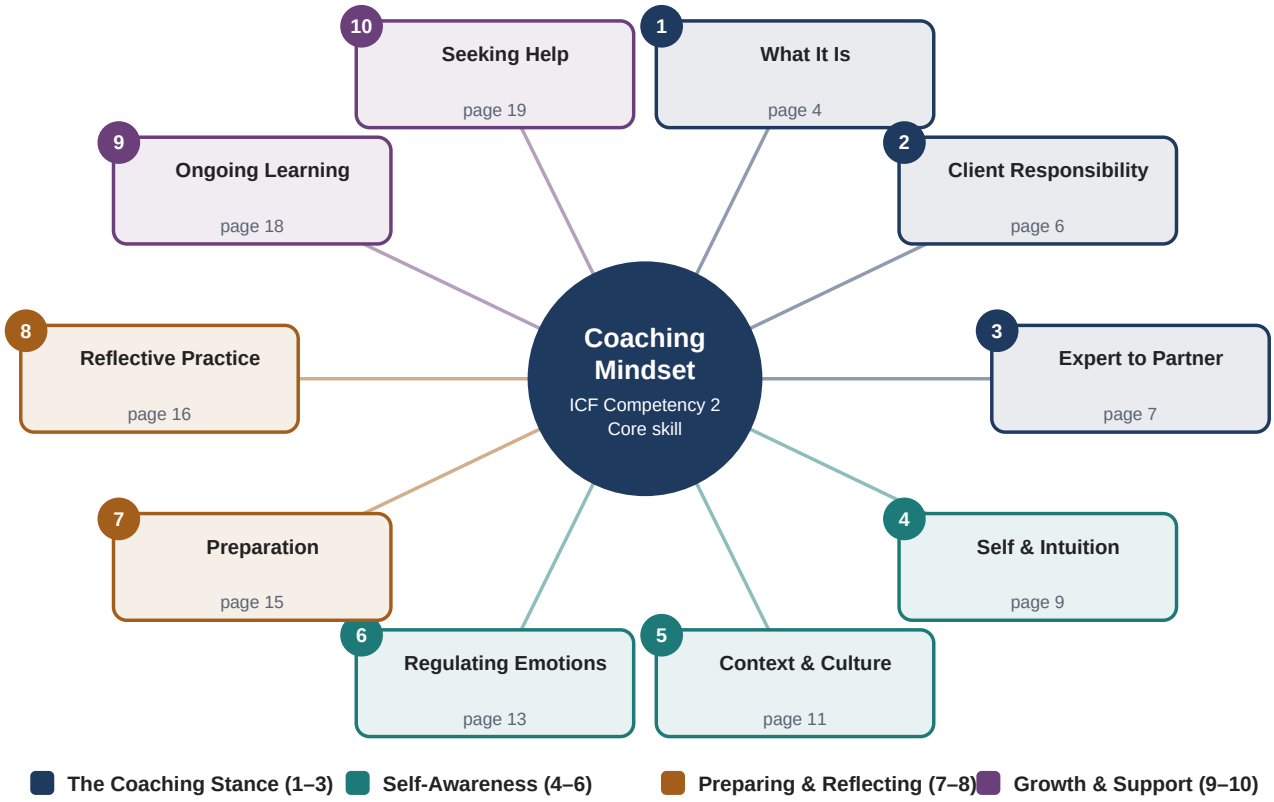
Paraphrased summary. For the official wording, see the ICF Core Competencies on coachingfederation.org.

Principles that keep the mindset client-centered

- **The client owns their life.** The coach supports choices; the coach does not make them.
- **Be curious before being certain.** What you think you know is a hypothesis.
- **Stay flexible.** Follow the client, not your own plan or preferred method.
- **Know your lens.** Your culture, history and habits shape what you hear.
- **Look after yourself.** A depleted coach cannot hold a steady space.
- **Keep learning.** The mindset is a practice that grows with reflection and feedback.

Map of Areas

The ten areas fall into four themes, shown by color. Each box links to its section when the PDF is opened in a viewer that supports links.



The four themes

Theme	The question it answers	Areas
The Coaching Stance	How do I see the client and my role?	1 What a Coaching Mindset Is, 2 Client Responsibility & Choice, 3 From Expert to Partner
Self-Awareness	What do I bring of myself?	4 Self-Awareness & Intuition, 5 Context, Culture & Bias, 6 Regulating Your Emotions
Preparing & Reflecting	How do I get ready, and learn after?	7 Mental & Emotional Preparation, 8 Reflective Practice
Growth & Support	How do I keep growing and well?	9 Ongoing Learning & Development, 10 Seeking Help & Sustaining the Mindset

How to use this guide

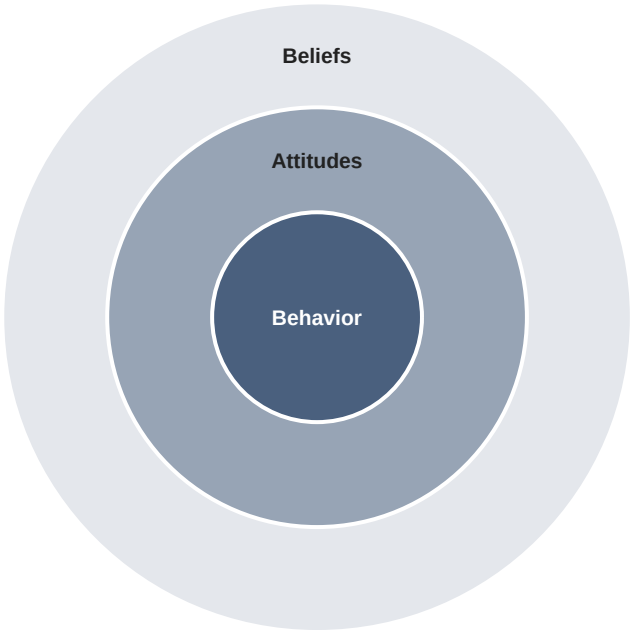
1. **Start with yourself.** This competency is about the coach more than the client.
2. **Adapt the prompts.** Many questions here are for self-reflection and supervision.
3. **Use the worksheets lightly.** Honest notes beat perfect ones.
4. **Share with a peer or mentor.** Reflection grows in conversation.

1

THE COACHING STANCE · HOW THE COACH SEES THE CLIENT AND THE WORK

What a Coaching Mindset Is

A coaching mindset is a way of being with clients: open, curious, flexible and centered on the client. It sits beneath behavior. Coaches who hold it ask better questions because they believe in the client's capacity to find their own way.



Behavior
What the client sees and hears: questions, silence, reflections, how the coach responds.

Attitudes
Openness, curiosity and respect that shape every choice the coach makes in the moment.

Beliefs
Deep convictions: the client is capable, the answers are theirs, and I am a partner.

A mindset has layers. Behavior grows from attitudes, and attitudes from beliefs.

Open — willing to hear anything without defending.

- *"What would I need to let go of to hear this fully?"*
- *"What am I resisting hearing right now?"*
- *"What would it be like to be wrong about this?"*

Curious — interested in the client's world.

- *"What do I genuinely want to understand?"*
- *"What would I ask if I knew nothing?"*
- *"What is surprising about this client?"*

Flexible — adapting to the client and the moment.

- *"What does this client need that I did not plan for?"*
- *"Where am I holding on to my agenda?"*
- *"How can I follow the client's lead?"*

Client-centered — the client's agenda comes first.

- *"Whose agenda is this?"*
- *"What does the client want from this moment?"*
- *"How am I serving them, and not myself?"*

Belief in the client's capacity — trusting their resourcefulness.

- *"What strengths does this client already have?"*
- *"What do they already know?"*
- *"What would I ask if I fully trusted them?"*

Humility — the coach does not have to be the expert.

- *"What can I learn from this client?"*
- *"What do I not know about their world?"*
- *"How can I say 'I don't know' more freely?"*

Coaching mindset in contrast

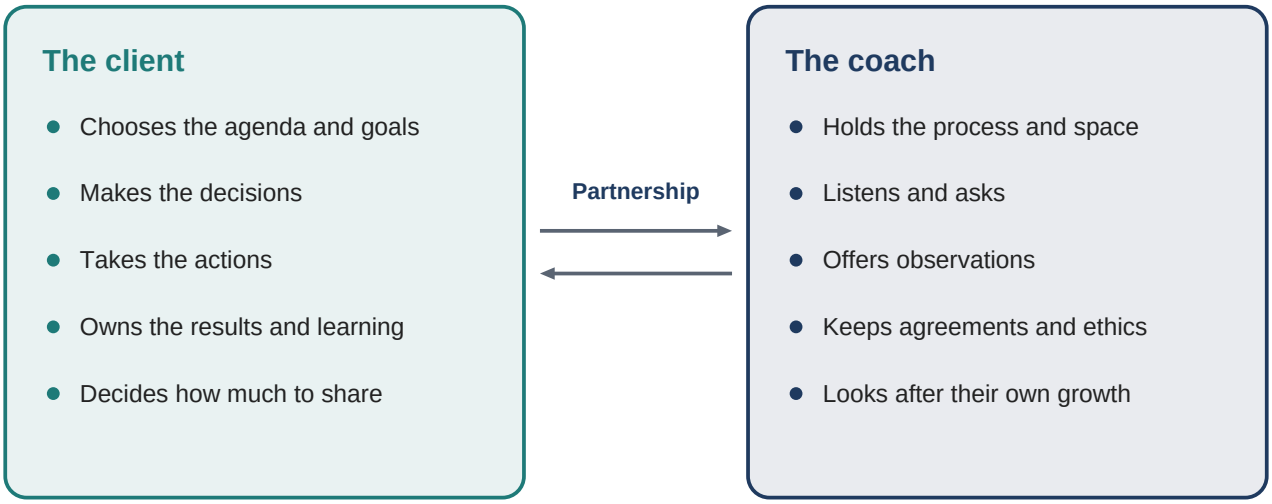
Area	Telling mindset	Coaching mindset
The client	Needs fixing or advice	Capable and resourceful
The coach	The expert with answers	A partner who asks and listens
Questions	To lead toward my answer	To open the client's thinking
Silence	A gap to fill	A space to think
Mistakes	To avoid or hide	Information to learn from
Success	Following my advice	The client's own growth and choices

> **Coach's note.** You do not have to feel a mindset perfectly. You practice it, notice where you slip back into telling, and choose again.

THE COACHING STANCE · HOW THE COACH SEES THE CLIENT AND THE WORK

2 Client Responsibility & Choice

Clients are responsible for their own choices. The coach supports, challenges and reflects, but never decides for the client or carries responsibility for results that belong to them.



Who holds what in the coaching relationship. Both sides are active; the decisions and actions belong to the client.

Returning choices to the client — leaving decisions where they belong.

- *"What do you want to do?"*
- *"What feels right to you?"*
- *"What will you choose?"*

Resisting rescue — not solving what the client can solve.

- *"What would you do if I weren't here?"*
- *"What have you already tried?"*
- *"What is the next step you'd take?"*

Respecting a different choice — supporting choices you would not make.

- *"Help me understand what makes that right for you."*
- *"What would it give you?"*
- *"How can I best support you in this?"*

Acknowledging the client's agency — naming their power.

- *"You have more say in this than it may feel like. What do you notice?"*
- *"What choices are open to you?"*
- *"What would you like to do with that?"*

Handling dependence — growing the client's self-trust.

- *"What do you already know about this?"*
- *"How could you rely more on your own judgment?"*
- *"What would you tell a friend in your place?"*

Shared responsibility for the process — the coach's part.

- *"Is this conversation serving you?"*
- *"What would make our time more useful?"*
- *"How am I doing as your coach?"*

Responsibility in practice

Situation	Taking it over	Returning it to the client
Client asks 'What should I do?'	*"Here's what I'd do."*	*"What options do you see? What feels right?"*
Client avoids a hard choice	*"Let me decide for you."*	*"What's making this hard to decide?"*
Client does not follow through	*"You must do it."*	*"What got in the way? What do you want to do?"*
Client blames others	*"They're wrong."*	*"What part is within your control?"*
Client wants approval	*"Great plan!"*	*"What do you think of the plan?"*

> **Coach's note.** Respecting responsibility does not mean standing back silently. The coach can challenge and share, then hand the choice back every time.

3

THE COACHING STANCE · HOW THE COACH SEES THE CLIENT AND THE WORK

From Expert to Partner

Many coaches come from fields where they were valued for answers. A coaching mindset asks them to shift from expert to partner: bringing expertise carefully, with permission, and never at the expense of the client's own thinking.

From partnering toward advising: use the top rungs first



A ladder from asking to advising. Start at the top and move down only with the client's permission.

Noticing the expert's pull — the urge to advise.

- *"What am I tempted to say?"*
- *"What am I afraid will happen if I don't advise?"*
- *"What would happen if I asked instead?"*

Using expertise wisely — sharing without taking over.

- *"Would it help if I shared something from my experience?"*
- *"Here's one view. How does it fit for you?"*
- *"What would you like to do with that?"*

Asking permission — before offering ideas or feedback.

- *"May I offer a thought?"*
- *"Would you like some feedback?"*
- *"Is it okay if I share what I'm noticing?"*

Offering options, not answers — keeping the client's choice open.

- *"Here are a few options. Which, if any, fits?"*
- *"What would you add?"*
- *"What would you take or leave?"*

Coaching versus mentoring or consulting — knowing the difference.

- *"Is this more of a coaching moment, or do you want input?"*
- *"Would you like me to switch hats for a moment?"*
- *"How would you like to use my experience?"*

Letting go of being right — releasing the need to be the expert.

- *"What if I'm wrong about this?"*
- *"What does the client see that I don't?"*
- *"What would it mean to be curious instead of right?"*

Expert or partner?

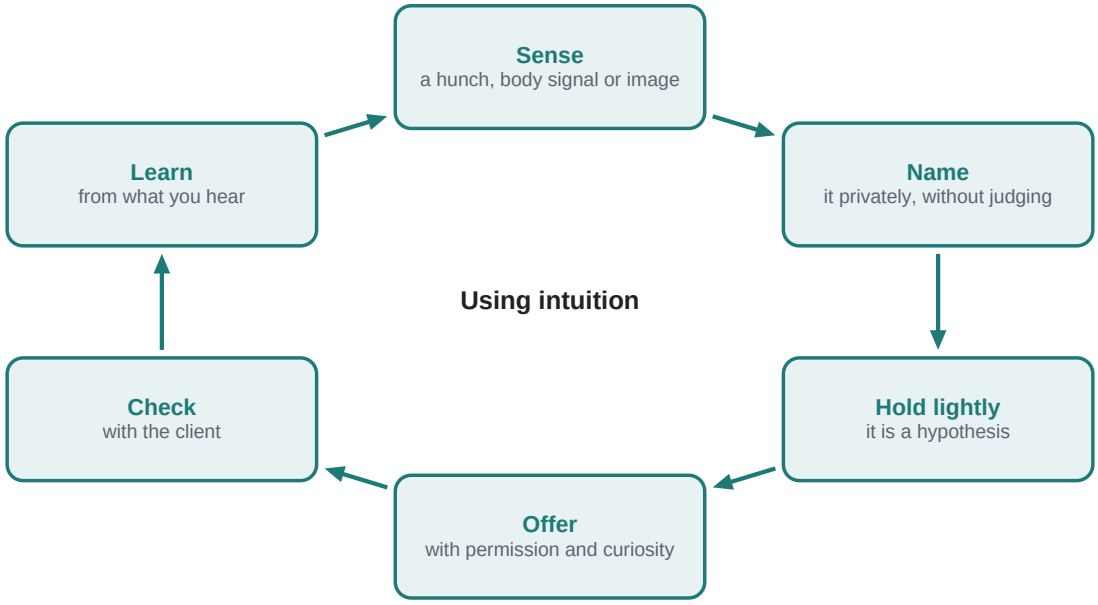
Expert	Partner
"The answer is…"	*"What are your thoughts?"*
"You should…"	*"What would you like to do?"*
"In my experience… (and stop)"	*"In my experience… how does that sit with you?"*
"That won't work."	*"What might happen if you try it?"*
"Let me fix this."	*"How would you like to approach it?"*

> **Coach's note.** Your expertise is a resource, not the agenda. If you do share it, say that you are sharing, keep it short, and ask what the client makes of it.

SELF-AWARENESS · SELF, INTUITION, CULTURE AND EMOTION

4 Self-Awareness & Intuition

The coach is an instrument. Knowing your habits, triggers, strengths and hunches lets you use yourself on behalf of the client, and avoid letting your own needs steer the conversation.



A cycle for using intuition. A hunch is a question to share, never a conclusion to impose.

Knowing your strengths — what you bring.

- *"Where do I naturally serve clients well?"*
- *"What do clients say they value in me?"*
- *"What do I offer that is uniquely mine?"*

Knowing your patterns — habits that help or hinder.

- *"What do I tend to do when I'm anxious?"*
- *"What types of clients bring out my best, and my worst?"*
- *"What am I like when I'm tired?"*

Recognizing your triggers — topics or behaviors that stir you.

- *"What stirs me up in a session?"*
- *"What does that remind me of?"*
- *"What do I do when I'm triggered?"*

Listening to your body — physical signals as information.

- *"What am I feeling in my body right now?"*
- *"What is my body telling me about this client?"*
- *"What helps me settle?"*

Trusting intuition, with care — hunches and images.

- *"Something just came to me. May I share it, and you tell me if it fits?"*
- *"What's my hunch, and what might it be based on?"*
- *"How will I check this rather than assume it?"*

Separating mine from theirs — knowing whose feeling it is.

- *“Is this feeling mine, the client’s or both?”*
- *“What am I adding that the client hasn’t said?”*
- *“What would help me tell the difference?”*

Self-awareness check-in (worksheet)

Prompt	My answer
A strength I bring to coaching	
A habit that sometimes gets in my way	
A topic or behavior that triggers me	
A hunch I had recently, and what I did with it	
One thing I want to notice next session	

A private worksheet for your own reflection or supervision.

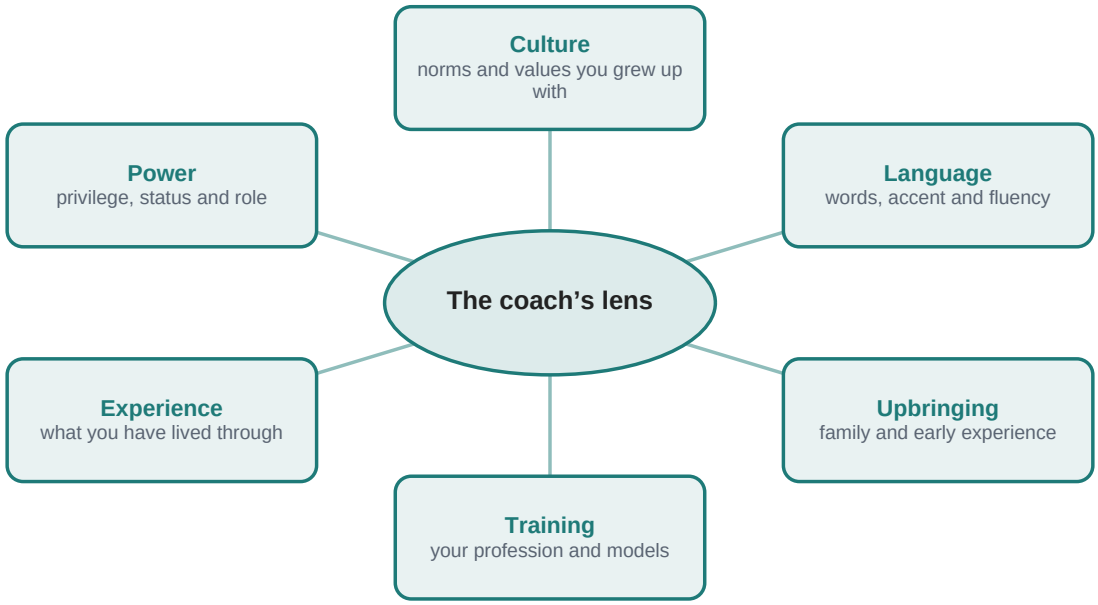
> **Coach’s note.** Intuition is information, not authority. Offer it tentatively, and be ready to hear “No, that’s not it.”

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SELF-AWARENESS · SELF, INTUITION, CULTURE AND EMOTION

Context, Culture & Bias

Every coach listens through a lens built from culture, language, family, training and experience. A coaching mindset stays aware of that lens and open to how context shapes the client, the coach and what happens between them.



Six parts of the coach's lens. Naming them reduces their unseen influence.

Awareness of your own culture — seeing your own norms.

- *"What did I learn is normal, polite or professional?"*
- *"What does my culture value in conversation?"*
- *"How might that differ from my client's?"*

Openness to difference — staying curious about others.

- *"How does your background shape how you see this?"*
- *"What should I understand about your context?"*
- *"What would you like me to know about how you communicate?"*

Noticing assumptions and bias — catching shortcuts.

- *"What am I assuming about this person?"*
- *"Where might I be stereotyping?"*
- *"What if the opposite were true?"*

Power and privilege — how status shapes the relationship.

- *"How does power show up between us?"*
- *"What might be harder for you to say to me?"*
- *"How can I make it easier for you to disagree?"*

Language and accent — listening across fluency.

- *"Would it help if I slowed down or checked more often?"*
- *"Is there a word in your own language that captures this?"*
- *"Let me check I understood…"*

Inclusion and accessibility — making coaching usable for everyone.

- *“What would make our sessions more accessible for you?”*
- *“What should I adjust in format, pace or tools?”*
- *“What helps you think and speak most comfortably?”*

Bias check before and after sessions

Moment	A question to ask yourself
Before	What do I already assume about this client, from their name, role or story?
During	Am I hearing their meaning, or filling it in with mine?
Difficult moment	Would I respond the same way to someone different from this client?
After	Whose voice did I find easier or harder to hear?
Over time	What patterns do I see in whom I coach well, and whom I struggle with?

> **Coach’s note.** Bias is not a character flaw; it is part of being human. The mindset is noticing it, naming it and checking it with curiosity and, when useful, with a supervisor.

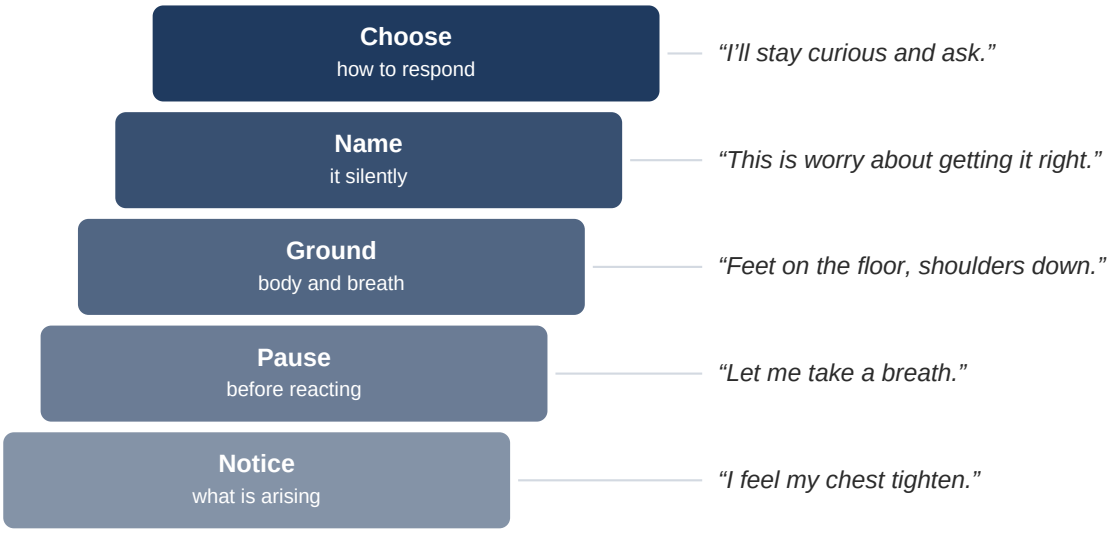
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SELF-AWARENESS · SELF, INTUITION, CULTURE AND EMOTION

Regulating Your Emotions

Coaches feel too. Regulating emotions does not mean having none; it means noticing what arises, managing it so it does not take over, and staying steady enough to serve the client.

A five-step reset you can do in seconds



A reset for the moment. Even one or two steps help.

Noticing emotion early — catching the first signals.

- *"What am I feeling right now?"*
- *"Where do I feel it in my body?"*
- *"What is the first sign I'm getting stirred?"*

In-the-moment regulation — staying steady during a session.

- *"What helps me settle: breath, posture or a pause?"*
- *"How can I slow my pace?"*
- *"What would help me return to center?"*

Strong client emotion — not being swept away.

- *"How can I stay present with this without absorbing it?"*
- *"What do I need to stay steady?"*
- *"Is this within the scope of coaching?"*

When you feel judged or challenged — defensiveness and ego.

- *"What is making me defensive?"*
- *"What is the client really asking?"*
- *"How can I stay curious instead?"*

After a hard session — releasing what you carry.

- *"What do I need to put down before the next session?"*
- *"Who can I talk this through with?"*
- *"What helps me recover?"*

Building regulation over time — habits that make it easier.

- *“What daily practices keep me steady?”*
- *“What are my early warning signs of overload?”*
- *“What do I need more of to stay well?”*

What helps, by moment

Moment	What may help
Before a session	Breath, a short walk, closing other tasks
Mid-session surge	A slow breath, feel your feet, soften the shoulders
After a heavy session	Move, drink water, note what you carry, talk it through
End of day	A short review, then genuinely switch off
Ongoing	Sleep, movement, supervision, boundaries

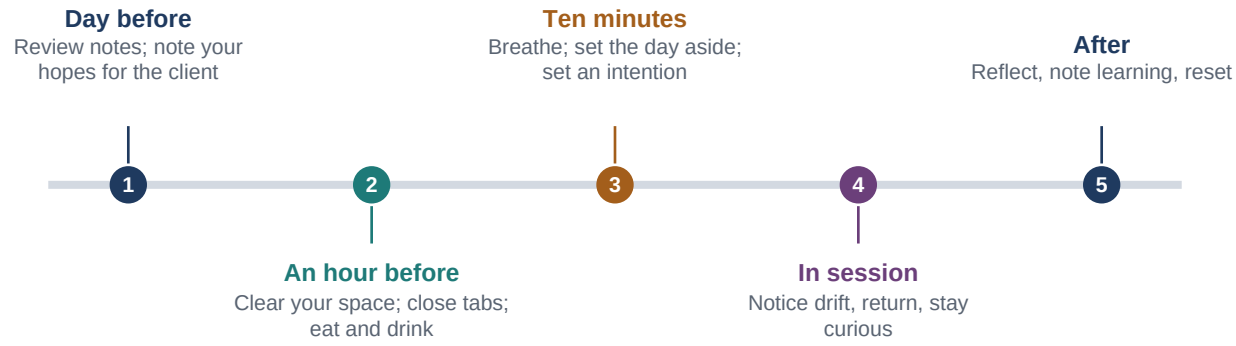
> **Coach’s note.** If strong feelings keep returning, treat that as useful data and take it to supervision or your own support, not as a personal failing.

7

PREPARING & REFLECTING · BEFORE AND AFTER EVERY SESSION

Mental & Emotional Preparation

Presence in a session starts before it begins. A short, regular preparation helps you arrive grounded, clear of the day's noise and ready to be curious about this particular client.



A preparation timeline from the day before to after the session. Adapt it to your rhythm.

Preparing your mind — reviewing without prejudging.

- *"What did we discuss last time?"*
- *"What might be on this client's mind today?"*
- *"What can I set aside so I meet them fresh?"*

Preparing your body — arriving rested and settled.

- *"Have I eaten, had water and moved a bit?"*
- *"How is my energy for this session?"*
- *"What helps my body feel ready?"*

Clearing the day — setting aside other concerns.

- *"What am I carrying from earlier?"*
- *"What can wait until after?"*
- *"What do I need to let go of for the next hour?"*

Setting an intention — choosing how you want to show up.

- *"How do I want to be with this client today?"*
- *"What quality would serve them most?"*
- *"What is my intention for this conversation?"*

Your emotional readiness — checking your own state.

- *"How am I feeling right now?"*
- *"Do I need support before this session?"*
- *"Is this session one I can hold well today?"*

Environment and tools — removing avoidable friction.

- *"Is my space quiet and private?"*
- *"Are my tools working?"*
- *"What might distract me, and can I remove it?"*

Pre-session routine (sample)

Step	What to do	Time
Review	Read notes; notice your assumptions	3 minutes
Clear	Close tabs; silence notifications	1 minute
Settle	Three slow breaths; feel your feet	1 minute
Intend	Choose how you want to show up	30 seconds
Arrive	Turn toward the client with curiosity	Now

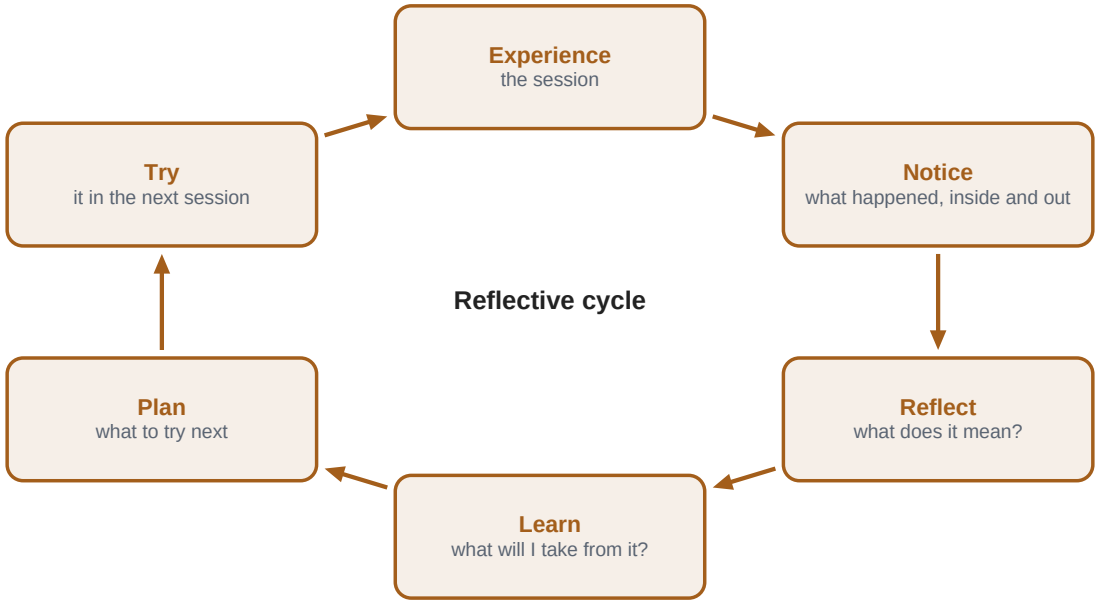
> **Coach's note.** A routine you actually use beats a perfect one you skip. Even sixty seconds of settling changes how you arrive.

8

PREPARING & REFLECTING · BEFORE AND AFTER EVERY SESSION

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice turns experience into learning. By looking back at sessions with honesty and kindness, coaches see their habits, celebrate what worked and decide what to try next.



A reflective cycle. Each session is both work and learning.

Reflecting after sessions — short notes while fresh.

- *"What went well, and what did I do to help that?"*
- *"What would I do differently?"*
- *"What surprised me?"*

Noticing your patterns — habits across many sessions.

- *"What do I do again and again?"*
- *"Which questions do I rely on too much?"*
- *"Where do I tend to rescue, fix or rush?"*

Using notes and recordings — evidence for learning, with consent.

- *“Where did I miss a cue?”*
- *“Which of my questions opened the conversation?”*
- *“What did I say too much of?”*

Asking for feedback — from clients and peers.

- *“What is working for you in our conversations?”*
- *“What would you like more or less of?”*
- *“What do you notice about how I coach?”*

Self-compassion in reflection — learning without self-criticism.

- *“What would I say to a colleague in this situation?”*
- *“What can I forgive myself for?”*
- *“What did I do well, even in a hard session?”*

Turning reflection into action — choosing one next step.

- *“What is the one thing I will practice?”*
- *“How will I know I’ve improved?”*
- *“Who can help me with this?”*

Session reflection log (worksheet)

Prompt	My notes
One thing that went well	
One moment I would handle differently	
One thing I noticed in myself	
One thing I learned from the client	
One thing to try next time	

A private log. Keep client details confidential and anonymous.

> **Coach’s note.** Aim for honest, kind reflection. Five minutes after each session, kept regularly, teaches more than an occasional long review.

9

GROWTH & SUPPORT · LEARNING, HELP AND SUSTAINING THE MINDSET

Ongoing Learning & Development

A coaching mindset treats mastery as a path with no end. Coaches keep learning through study, practice, feedback and curiosity about the craft, the people they serve and themselves.



Four stages of learning a skill (a widely used model). Most coaches move through these many times, in different areas, across a career.

Making a learning plan — choosing what to develop.

- *"What do I most want to develop this year?"*
- *"What skills would help my clients most?"*
- *"How will I make time for learning?"*

Training and education — courses, books and communities.

- *"What training would stretch me?"*
- *"What do I want to read or study?"*
- *"Which communities could I join?"*

Mentor coaching and feedback — learning from observation.

- *"What would a mentor coach notice about my coaching?"*
- *"What feedback do I find hardest to hear?"*
- *"What would I like help with?"*

Peer learning — practicing with colleagues.

- *"Who can I practice with regularly?"*
- *"What could I learn from a peer group?"*
- *"What would I like to offer others?"*

Staying current — standards, research and ethics.

- *"How do I keep up with standards and ethics?"*
- *"What have I learned recently that changed my practice?"*
- *"What do I want to understand better?"*

Credentials and standards — growth through recognition, if you choose.

- *"Is a credential right for me, and why?"*
- *"What would help me prepare?"*
- *"What do I want my credential to say about my practice?"*

A simple development plan

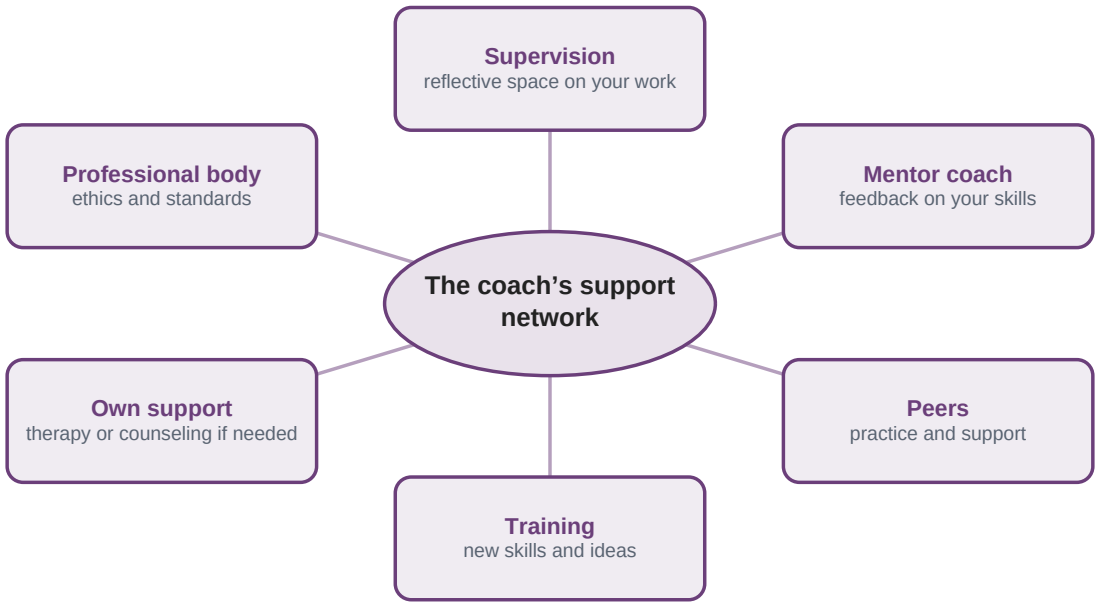
Area to grow	How	Support	By when

Coach's note. Learning is easier with a small, specific target. Choose one skill, practice it for a month, ask for feedback and then choose the next.

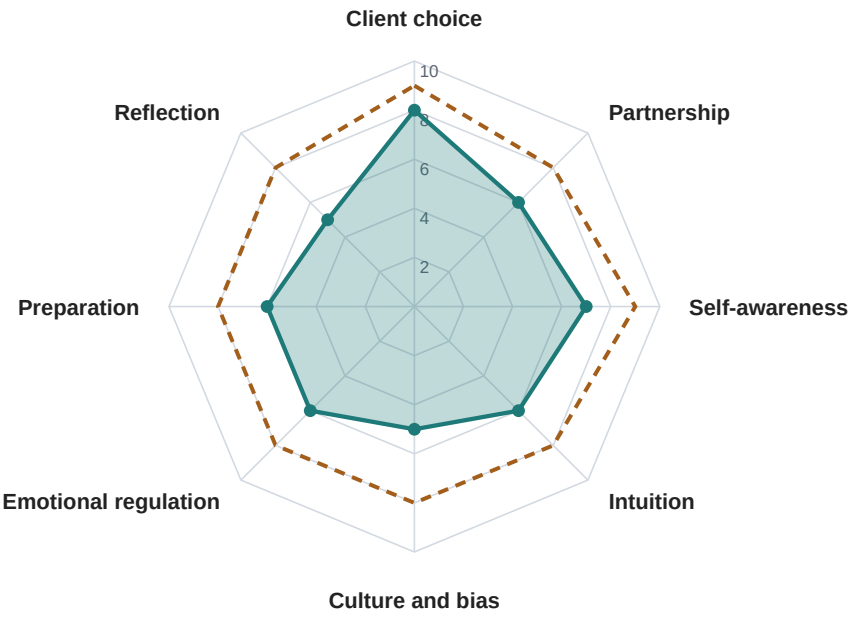
10 Seeking Help & Sustaining the Mindset

GROWTH & SUPPORT · LEARNING, HELP AND SUSTAINING THE MINDSET

No coach works alone. Seeking help from supervisors, mentors, peers or other professionals when needed is a sign of maturity. It protects clients and sustains the coach over a career.



A support network for the coach. Different needs call for different kinds of help.



How to use the wheel

Rate yourself from 0 (center) to 10 (outer ring) in each area, today and where you want to be.

Pick one or two areas to practice for a month, and take the wheel to a mentor or peer.

Scores here are samples for illustration only.

Today (sample)

Goal (sample)

A coaching mindset self-assessment (sample scores). A conversation starter, not a test.

Knowing when to seek help — signs it's time.

- *"What am I struggling with that I can't resolve alone?"*
- *"What would a supervisor ask me about this?"*
- *"What would I tell a colleague in this situation?"*

Supervision and consultation — reflecting with an experienced person.

- *"What do I want to bring to supervision?"*
- *"What am I carrying from my sessions?"*
- *"What would help me see this differently?"*

Referring clients on — when coaching is not enough.

- *"I wonder whether other support would serve you better. What do you think?"*
- *"Would you like me to suggest some options?"*
- *"How can we make this transition well?"*

The coach's own support — therapy, counseling or healthcare.

- *"What do I need for my own wellbeing?"*
- *"What would help me more than another coaching technique?"*
- *"Who can I turn to?"*

Sustainable practice — pace, boundaries and rest.

- *"How many sessions can I hold well?"*
- *"What would a sustainable week look like?"*
- *"What boundaries protect my energy?"*

Reconnecting with purpose — why you coach.

- *"What first drew me to coaching?"*
- *"What gives me energy in this work?"*
- *"What kind of coach do I want to be?"*

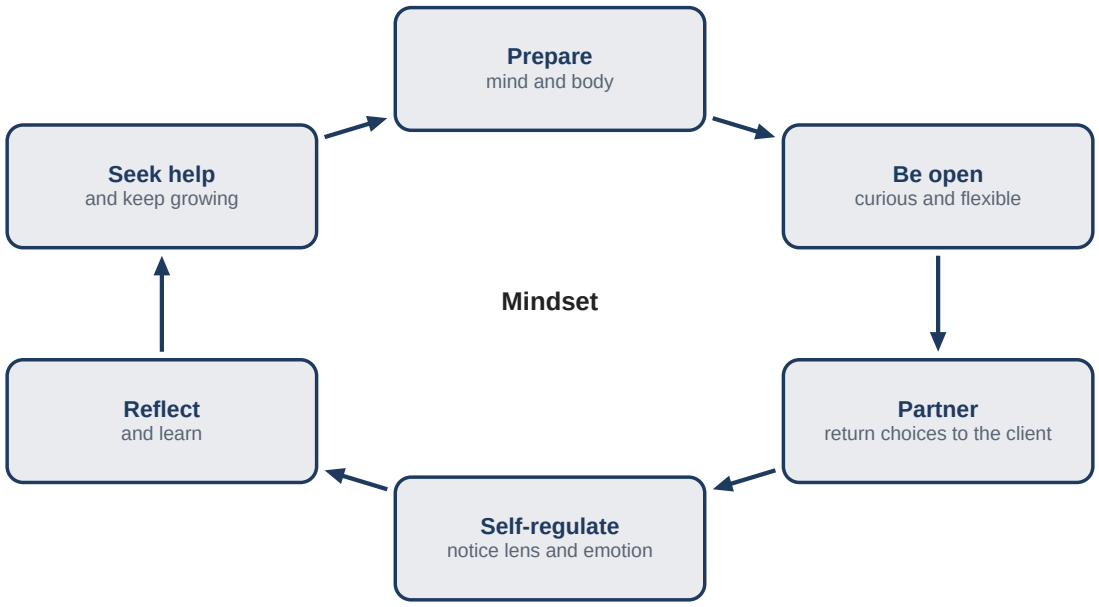
Who can help with what

Need	Possible support	Example
Skill feedback	Mentor coach	Review a recorded session
A hard case or ethical dilemma	Supervisor or ethics resources	Talk through a conflict of interest
Practice and encouragement	Peer group	Monthly practice triads
Strong personal reactions	Own therapist or counselor	Explore recurring triggers
Knowledge gap	Training or reading	A course on a new topic
Standards and ethics	Professional body	ICF Code of Ethics

> **Coach's note.** Aim for progress, not perfection. A coach who asks for help models the same openness they invite in clients.

Putting It Together

The coaching mindset is a cycle rather than a checklist. The coach prepares, brings openness and curiosity, returns choices to the client, notices their own lens and emotions, reflects, learns and seeks help.



The coaching mindset cycle.

Do and avoid

Do	Avoid
Return choices to the client	Deciding or advising by habit
Stay curious and flexible	Clinging to the plan or being right
Name your own lens and bias	Assuming your view is neutral
Regulate and recover	Absorbing or ignoring your emotions
Reflect after sessions	Moving on without learning
Ask for help early	Struggling alone

Phrases by purpose

Purpose	Sample phrases	When to use
Return the choice	*What do you want to do?*	When asked for the answer
Ask permission	*May I offer a thought?*	Before sharing expertise
Stay curious	*What would I ask if I knew nothing?*	When you assume
Admit a limit	*I don't know. What do you think?*	When tempted to bluff
Own a lens	*My background may color how I hear this. Tell me if I miss.*	In cross-cultural work
Seek help	*I'd like to talk this through with my supervisor.*	Before a stuck point becomes a problem

Practical notes

- **Start small.** One habit, practiced for a month, changes more than ten intentions.
- **Notice and return.** Slipping into advice is normal; noticing is the skill.
- **Write it down.** A few lines after each session build self-knowledge.
- **Ask for feedback.** Others see what you cannot.
- **Protect your energy.** Rest is part of the work.
- **Stay a learner.** Curiosity about yourself keeps the mindset alive.

Session Checklist

A quick review after a session, or before the next one.

- [ ] I prepared my mind and body before the session.
- [ ] I stayed open, curious and flexible.
- [ ] I returned choices and decisions to the client.
- [ ] I asked permission before offering my own views.
- [ ] I noticed my own lens, assumptions and bias.
- [ ] I noticed my emotions and regulated them.
- [ ] I used my intuition tentatively and checked it with the client.
- [ ] I reflected on what went well and what I would change.
- [ ] I identified one thing to learn or practice.
- [ ] I considered whether I need support, supervision or feedback.