

A VISUAL SUMMARY

Coaching Ethics, ICF Standards & Applications

in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)

Ethics in practice for NLP-informed coaches: the 2025 ICF Code of Ethics and Core Competencies, boundaries, contracting, confidentiality, business vs. personal coaching — with scenarios and case studies.

ICF Code 2025 | Competencies | Business vs personal | Scenarios | Case studies

Reflects the ICF Code of Ethics effective 1 April 2025 and the 2025 ICF Core Competencies update. Always check coachingfederation.org for the current official wording.

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SECTION 01

Why Ethics Matters in NLP Coaching

NLP gives coaches powerful tools for influencing state, belief and behaviour. That power — combined with an unregulated field — makes a clear ethical framework essential.

Coaching is not a regulated profession in most countries, and neither is NLP. Anyone can call themselves a coach or an NLP practitioner. Professional bodies such as the **International Coaching Federation (ICF)** fill part of that gap with codes of ethics, competency models and credentials that clients and organisations recognise.

For NLP-trained coaches, ethics has some extra dimensions: techniques that work partly outside awareness (anchoring, hypnotic language), methods that touch memory and emotion (timeline work, phobia processes), and a history of bold marketing claims that the research does not support.



Figure 1. What ethical practice protects.

Risk area	Why NLP coaches need extra care
Influence outside awareness	Anchoring, pacing and Milton language can shape responses the client may not notice
Emotional depth	Timeline, re-imprinting and phobia techniques can stir strong memories
Claims and evidence	NLP has limited research support; overstated claims mislead clients
Blurred roles	Many NLP practitioners are also trainers, hypnotherapists or therapists

SECTION 02

The ICF: Who Sets the Standards?

The International Coaching Federation is one of the largest professional bodies for coaches worldwide. Its Code of Ethics and Core Competencies are widely used reference points — including for NLP-trained coaches.

The ICF does not accredit NLP itself. It accredits **coach training programmes** and credentials **individual coaches**. An NLP-based coach training programme can be ICF-accredited if it meets ICF's requirements; an NLP Practitioner certificate on its own is not an ICF credential.

Credential	Coach-specific training	Coaching experience	Other requirements
ACC — Associate Certified Coach	60+ hours	100+ hours (75+ paid)	Mentor coaching, performance evaluation, ICF exam
PCC — Professional Certified Coach	125+ hours	500+ hours	Mentor coaching, performance evaluation, ICF exam
MCC — Master Certified Coach	200+ hours	2,500+ hours	Mentor coaching, performance evaluation, ICF exam

Requirements change periodically — check the ICF website for the current details before applying.



Figure 2. The general path to an ICF credential.

Other bodies	Relevance
EMCC Global & Association for Coaching	Publish the joint *Global Code of Ethics* for coaches, mentors and supervisors
NLP associations (e.g. ANLP, INLPTA)	Set their own standards for NLP training and practice; no single NLP standard exists
Therapy regulators (varies by country)	Apply if you also practise as a therapist or counsellor

SECTION 03

The 2025 ICF Code of Ethics: Structure

ICF's updated Code of Ethics took effect on 1 April 2025, replacing the 2020 version. It is reviewed every three years.

Purpose — *how to read and apply the Code*

Core Values & Ethical Principles — *Professionalism · Collaboration · Humanity · Equity*

Commitments for All within the ICF Ecosystem — *expectations for everyone, not just members*

ETHICAL STANDARDS · 24 standards in 5 sections

1	2	3	4	5
Agreements	**Confidentiality & legal**	**Conduct & conflicts**	**Consistent value**	**Integrity & accountability**
1.1–1.2	*2.1–2.8*	*3.1–3.8*	*4.1–4.3*	*5.1–5.3*

Appendix: Key Definitions · Glossary of Other Terms

e.g. client, sponsor, coaching, ICF Professional, conflict of interest

Figure 3. How the 2025 Code is organised.

What changed from 2020	Why it matters for NLP coaches
A **Purpose** section replaces the introduction	Clarifies that the Code guides ethical reflection, not just rule-following
Core values and principles included in full	Values are now part of the Code itself
New **Commitments for All within the ICF Ecosystem**	Applies to anyone engaging with ICF, not only members and credential holders
Standards regrouped into **five themed sections**	Easier to find the relevant standard in a dilemma
New standard on technology and **AI** (2.5)	Covers AI note-takers, transcription and coaching apps
New standard on **multiple roles** (3.7)	Disclose when acting as trainer, therapist, hypnotherapist, etc.
Key definitions and glossary in an appendix	Shared language: client, sponsor, coaching

ICF definition of coaching

The ICF defines coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential.” Note the word **partnering** — the client is a co-creator, not a subject to be programmed.

SECTION 04

ICF Core Values & Ethical Principles

The Code is built on four core values. Each comes with ethical principles that guide behaviour where no specific standard applies.

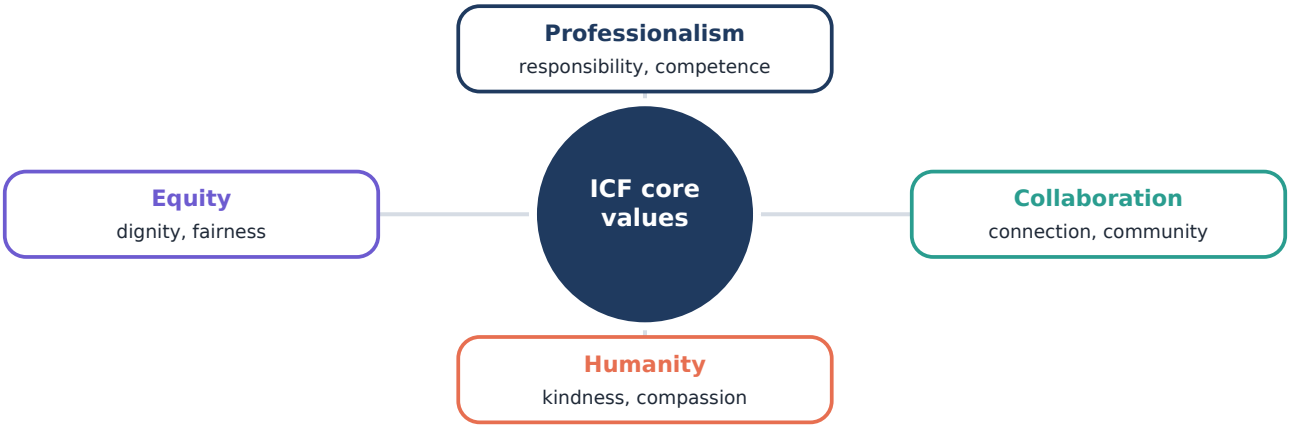


Figure 4. The four ICF core values.

Value	Ethical principles (summary)	In NLP coaching practice
Professionalism	Accurate statements; lifelong learning; keeping commitments; honesty; resilience	Represent NLP accurately; keep training up to date; take supervision
Collaboration	Partnering across groups; cooperating with other professionals; communicating with related professions	Build referral relationships with therapists and doctors
Humanity	Accepting imperfection; owning mistakes; modesty; inclusivity and dignity	Admit when a technique didn't help; avoid “guru” positioning
Equity	Respecting all identity groups; recognising bias and systemic issues; equality in relationships	Question NLP assumptions that may not fit every culture; check your own biases

Using values to decide

When a dilemma isn't covered by a specific standard, ask: *“Which response best expresses professionalism, collaboration, humanity and equity here?”*

SECTION 05

Standards 1–2: Agreements, Confidentiality & Legal Compliance

The first two sections deal with how the coaching relationship is set up and how information is protected.

Std	In brief (paraphrased)	NLP-specific application
1.1	Explain coaching and co-create a clear agreement on roles, confidentiality, fees and terms before starting	Explain which NLP methods you may use (e.g. anchoring, timeline work) and get informed consent
1.2	Respect every party's right to end the relationship	No pressure to complete a “programme” or buy more sessions
2.1	Maintain the strictest confidentiality with all parties	Applies to demo sessions in NLP trainings too
2.2	Agree in advance how information will be shared between client, sponsor and others	Three-way agreements in business coaching
2.3	Agree in advance when confidentiality may be broken (illegal activity, legal requirement, serious risk)	Make limits explicit at contracting
2.4	Store, maintain and dispose of records securely	Session notes, recordings, worksheets
2.5	Meet ethical and legal duties directly and through technology, including AI	AI transcription of sessions needs consent and secure tools
2.6–2.8	Support staff follow the Code; use contact information only as authorised; respect intellectual property	Credit NLP models and trainers; don't rebrand others' techniques as your own

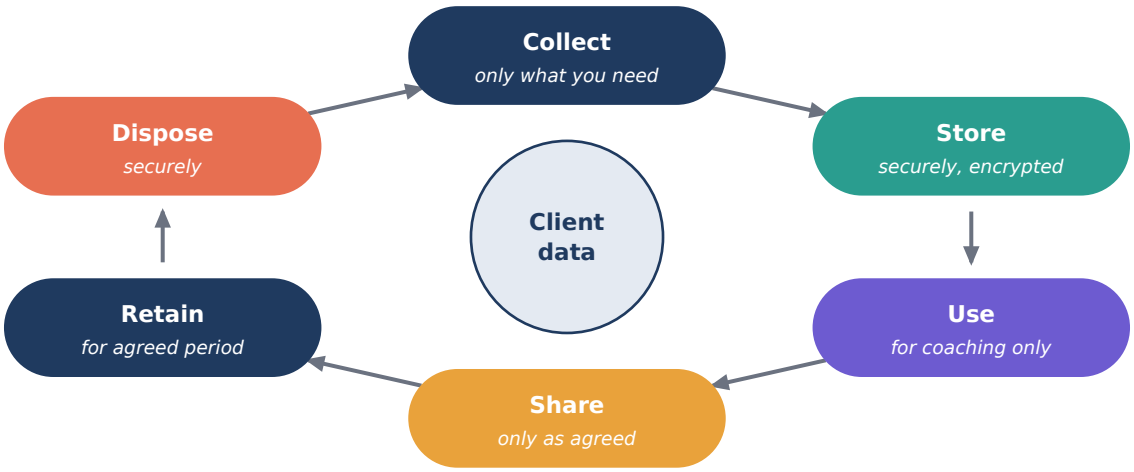


Figure 5. The client data lifecycle (standards 2.1–2.5).

SECTION 06

Standards 3–5: Conduct, Conflicts, Value & Integrity

The remaining sections cover boundaries and conflicts of interest, delivering real value, and honesty about who you are and what you offer.

Std	In brief (paraphrased)	NLP-specific application
3.1–3.3	Discuss, manage and resolve conflicts of interest and multiple relationships	Coaching a friend, colleague or your own NLP student
3.4	Set clear, appropriate, culturally sensitive boundaries	Touch anchors, session length, contact between sessions
3.5	Be aware of bias; avoid discrimination	Avoid labelling clients by “type” (e.g. VAK, meta-programs)
3.6	No sexual or romantic relationships with clients or sponsors	Rapport and intimacy can blur — stay alert
3.7	Disclose when acting in another role (therapist, mentor, trainer, etc.)	Coach vs. hypnotherapist vs. NLP trainer
3.8	Disclose referral fees or benefits	Commissions for recommending NLP courses
4.1	Recognise and manage power differences	Expert “practitioner” positioning can create dependence
4.2	Recognise personal limits; seek support; pause if needed	Your own state affects the client
4.3	Notice when coaching isn't adding value; discuss change or referral	Don't keep using techniques that aren't helping
5.1	Accurately state qualifications; work within competence	NLP certificates are not clinical qualifications
5.2	Make true and accurate statements about services and coaching	No “cure”, “reprogramming” or guaranteed outcomes
5.3	Aim to do good, not just avoid harm; accept accountability	Consider impact on clients, organisations and society

A spotlight on claims

Standard 5.2 is especially relevant for NLP. Claims such as “cure phobias in 10 minutes”, “rewire your brain” or “guaranteed success” are not supported by research and could breach the requirement for accurate statements.

SECTION 07

The ICF Core Competencies

The ICF Core Competencies describe what good coaching looks like. They were refined in 2025 but remain eight competencies in four domains.

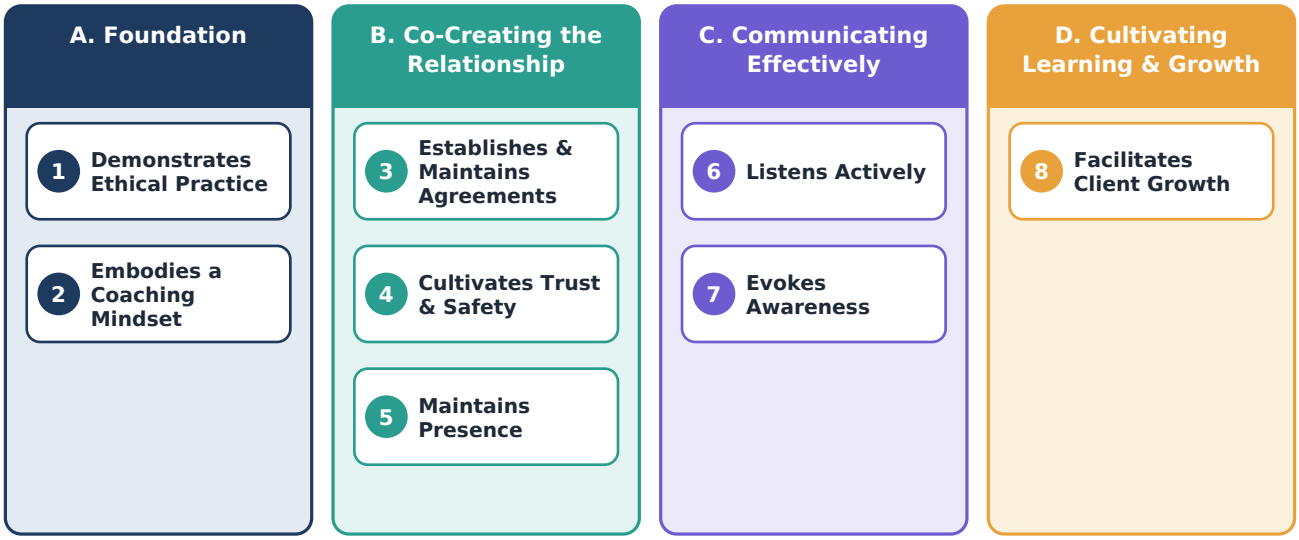


Figure 6. The eight ICF Core Competencies in four domains.

2025 update	Detail
Structure	Unchanged: 8 competencies in 4 domains
New markers	Five new behavioural markers across competencies 2, 3, 5 and 8
Biggest change	Competency 2 (Coaching Mindset) — revised definition and more markers, including references to supervision and mentor coaching
Glossary	An official glossary of coaching terms was published
Assessment	Credential exams move to the 2025 model in stages through 2026–2027; check ICF for dates that apply to you

Ethics is competency #1

Competency 1, **Demonstrates Ethical Practice**, links directly to the Code of Ethics: coaches must understand and apply the Code, maintain confidentiality, and refer when needed.

SECTION 08

Aligning NLP Tools with ICF Competencies

Many NLP skills map naturally onto ICF competencies. Others need adapting, because ICF coaching emphasises client-led discovery over practitioner-led intervention.

ICF competency	NLP tools that support it	Watch-out
3 Agreements	Well-formed outcomes; evidence frames	Client sets the goal — not the NLP technique
4 Trust & Safety	Rapport, pacing, perceptual positions	Rapport skills must not become manipulation
5 Presence	Sensory acuity, state management	Stay with the client, not with your next technique
6 Listens Actively	Backtracking, calibration, client's own words	Don't interpret through VAK or meta-program labels
7 Evokes Awareness	Meta Model questions, reframing, Sleight of Mouth	Ask, don't tell; invite rather than impose reframes
8 Facilitates Growth	Future pacing, anchoring, belief change work	Client designs actions; avoid dependence on the coach

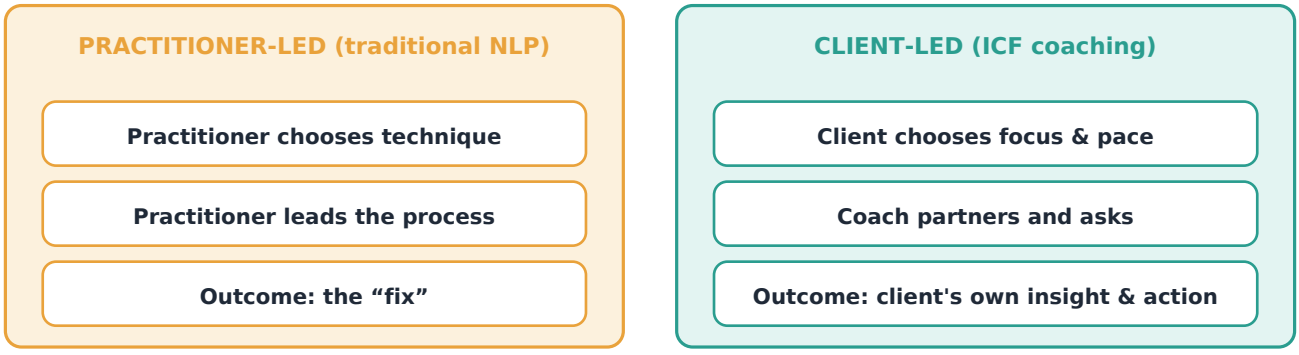


Figure 7. A shift in stance. NLP techniques can be offered within a client-led partnership.

Offer, don't impose

“Would it be useful to try an exercise that works with how you picture this situation?” — offering a technique as an option, with an explanation, respects the client's autonomy.

SECTION 09

Boundaries: Coaching, Therapy and Other Roles

Knowing what coaching is — and isn't — protects clients. Many NLP practitioners hold several roles, which makes clear boundaries especially important.

	Coaching	Therapy / counselling	Mentoring	Consulting / training
Focus	Present and future goals	Healing, mental health, past patterns	Sharing experience	Expert advice or skills
Who leads	Client	Shared, clinically informed	Mentor's experience	Expert
Clients	Generally well-functioning	May have clinical conditions	Less experienced people	Organisations, learners
Regulation	Mostly unregulated	Often regulated	Unregulated	Unregulated

When to refer

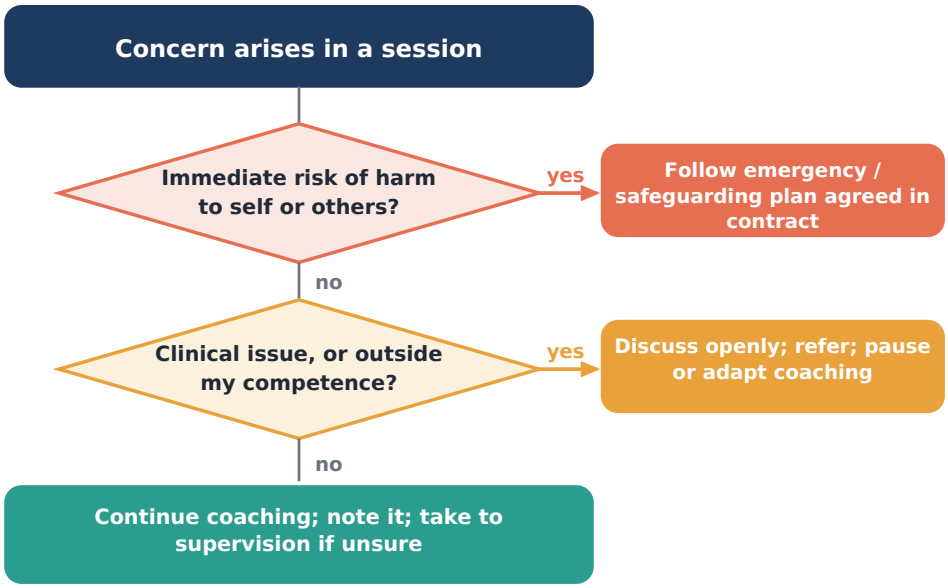


Figure 8. A simple referral decision path.

Signs that may call for referral: persistent low mood or hopelessness; talk of self-harm; trauma symptoms; substance dependence; eating difficulties; severe anxiety; a client who seems unable to function day to day.

SECTION 10

Contracting: The Coaching Agreement

Standard 1.1 requires a clear agreement before coaching begins. In business coaching, this often becomes a three-way agreement with a sponsor.

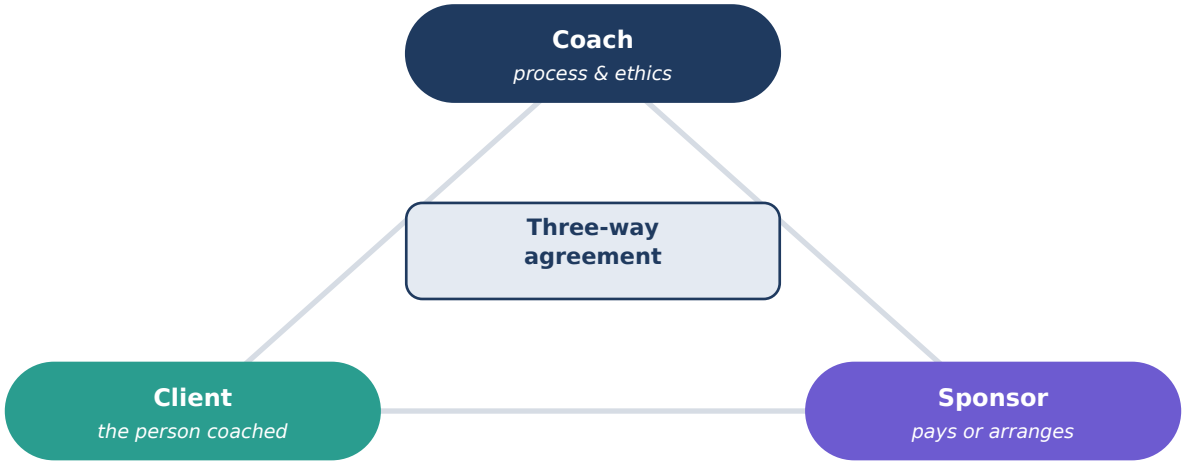


Figure 9. The three-way coaching relationship (common in business coaching).

Agreement element	Questions to settle	NLP-specific notes
Purpose & scope	What is coaching? What isn't it? What are the goals?	Explain NLP methods in plain language
Roles	Who is the client? Who is the sponsor?	Disclose any other roles (trainer, hypnotherapist)
Confidentiality	What stays private? What will be reported, to whom?	Agree before any sponsor update
Limits	When would confidentiality be broken?	Serious risk, legal requirement
Logistics	Fees, schedule, cancellation, contact between sessions	Number and length of sessions
Methods & consent	Which tools might be used? Can the client opt out?	Touch anchors, hypnotic language, recordings
Ending	How can either party end coaching?	No penalty for stopping early
Data & technology	Notes, recordings, AI tools — stored where and for how long?	Get explicit consent for AI tools

SECTION 11

Confidentiality, Data & AI

Confidentiality underpins trust. The 2025 Code extends it explicitly to technology, including AI tools used for notes, transcription or analysis.

Technology	Ethical questions	Good practice
AI note-takers & transcription	Does the client know? Where is the data processed? Is it used to train models?	Get explicit consent; use secure, privacy-compliant tools; offer an opt-out
Session recordings	Who can access them? How long are they kept?	Record only with consent; store securely; delete as agreed
Coaching platforms & apps	Who owns the data? Is it shared with the employer?	Check terms; tell clients what the sponsor can see
Messaging between sessions	Is it secure? Will the coach reply out of hours?	Agree channels and response times
Using AI to plan or reflect	Am I sharing identifiable client data?	Anonymise; never paste identifiable details into public tools

Consent
Tell clients and agree in writing

Minimise
Collect only what's needed

Secure
Encrypted storage and transfer

Comply
Follow local data protection law (e.g. GDPR)

Training rooms count too

In ICF-accredited training, practice sessions and demonstrations of NLP techniques involve real personal material. The same confidentiality applies — what's shared in a training room stays there.

SECTION 12

An Ethical Decision-Making Process

Ethical dilemmas rarely have one obvious answer. A structured process helps coaches think clearly and justify their choice.

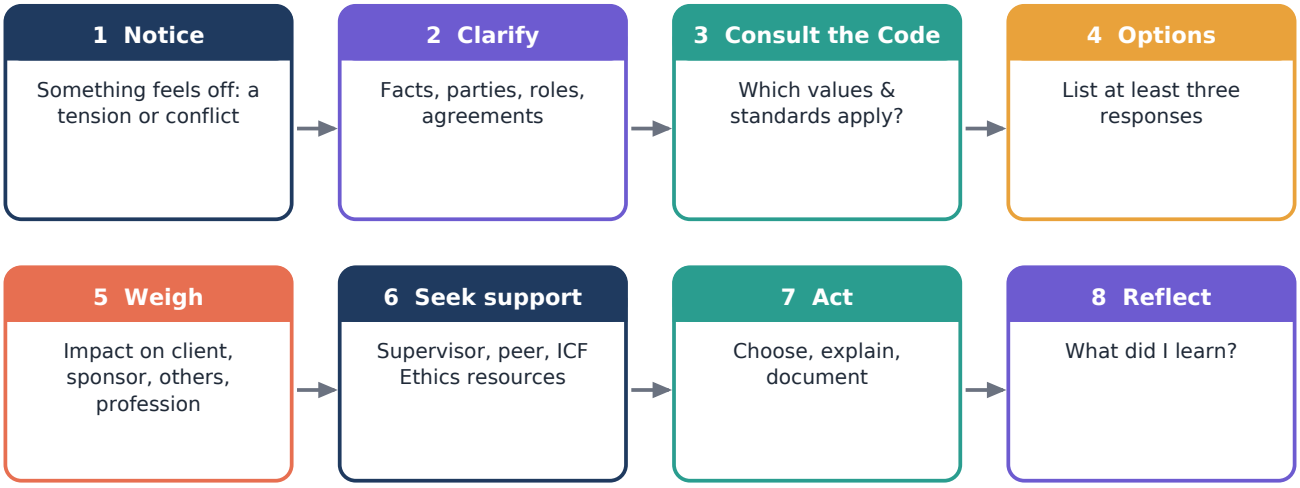


Figure 10. An eight-step ethical decision-making process (a general framework, not an ICF-mandated model).

Test	Question to ask yourself
Transparency	Would I be comfortable if the client, sponsor and ICF knew exactly what I did and why?
Client interest	Whose interests does this option serve most?
Consistency	Would I do the same for any client in this situation?
Competence	Am I trained and supervised for this?
Reversibility	If I were the client, would I accept this?

Support available

ICF offers ethics resources, including an Ethics Assist service for confidential guidance, and an Ethical Conduct Review process for complaints. Regular coaching supervision is one of the best ethical safeguards.

SECTION 13

Business vs. Personal Coaching

The same ethical principles apply across all coaching, but how they play out differs between personal (life) coaching and business (executive or organisational) coaching.



Figure 11. Coaching contexts from personal to business.

Dimension	Personal / life coaching	Business / executive coaching
Who pays	Usually the client	Usually the organisation (sponsor)
Who is the client	Clear: the person coached	The person coached — but the sponsor has legitimate interests
Goals	Set by the client	Agreed between client and sponsor, often linked to role
Confidentiality	Between coach and client	Three-way: what is reported must be agreed in advance
Typical risks	Drift into therapy; dependence; overpromising	Sponsor pressure for information; conflicts of interest; using coaching for performance management
NLP tools	Belief and values work, anchoring, timeline (with care)	Outcome frames, perceptual positions, Meta Model, reframing
Measuring value	Client's own sense of progress	Agreed metrics, 360 feedback, sponsor review
Marketing	Often to individuals online — risk of hype	Proposals to organisations — risk of inflated ROI claims

The key principle

In business coaching, the person being coached is still the client. The sponsor can receive agreed information (e.g. attendance, broad themes) but not the content of sessions unless the client agrees.

SECTION 14

Ethics of NLP Techniques

Some NLP techniques carry more ethical weight than others. The deeper a technique works with emotion, memory or the body, the more care, consent and training it needs.

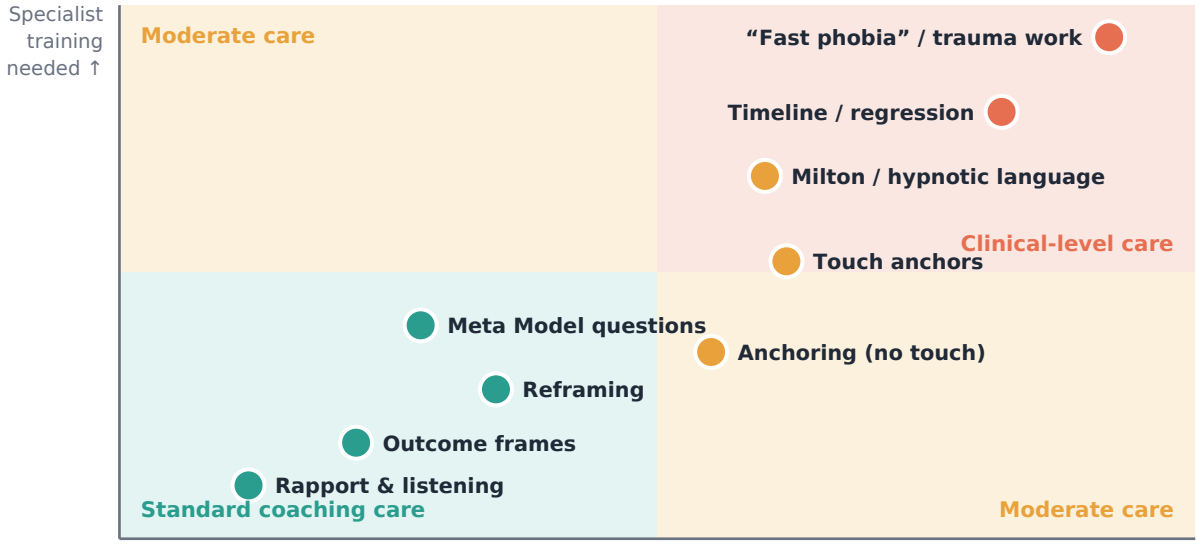


Figure 12. An illustrative guide to the level of care different NLP techniques call for (author's judgement, not an ICF classification).

Technique	Ethical considerations
Rapport & pacing	Use to understand, not to lower someone's guard
Touch anchors	Explicit permission each time; neutral locations; offer a no-touch alternative
Milton / hypnotic language	Tell clients when you're using relaxation or trance-like methods; avoid covert hypnosis
Timeline & regression work	Can surface painful memories; screen first; stop if distress rises; refer if needed
Phobia & trauma processes	Treat as clinical work; refer rather than attempt unless properly qualified

SECTION 15

Scenarios: Quick Ethical Dilemmas

Short real-world situations with the relevant standards and a suggested response. Consider your own answer before reading the suggestion.

#	Situation	Ethical issue	Std.	Suggested response
1	A client asks you to “just anchor away” her anxiety before a court case.	Scope; claims	4.3, 5.1	Explore what she needs; offer coaching for preparation; suggest professional support for anxiety
2	An HR manager asks what a coachee said about his boss.	Confidentiality	2.1, 2.2	Refer to the agreement; share only agreed information; encourage a direct conversation
3	You want to use an AI tool to transcribe sessions.	Technology & consent	2.4, 2.5	Get explicit consent; check data security; offer an opt-out
4	A former NLP course student asks you for coaching.	Multiple roles	3.1, 3.7	Discuss the shift in roles openly; agree boundaries; consider referring
5	Your website says “NLP rewires your brain in one session.”	Accurate statements	5.2	Rewrite to describe what coaching offers, without guarantees
6	A client mentions she hasn't eaten properly for weeks and feels hopeless.	Referral; risk	4.2, 4.3	Gently share your concern; encourage contact with a doctor; follow the safety plan if there's risk
7	An NLP trainer offers you 20% commission for each client you refer.	Referral fees	3.8	Disclose the arrangement to clients — or decline it
8	You feel attracted to a client and they seem to reciprocate.	Boundaries	3.6	Take it to supervision; maintain boundaries; refer on if it can't be managed

Triage: how quickly to act

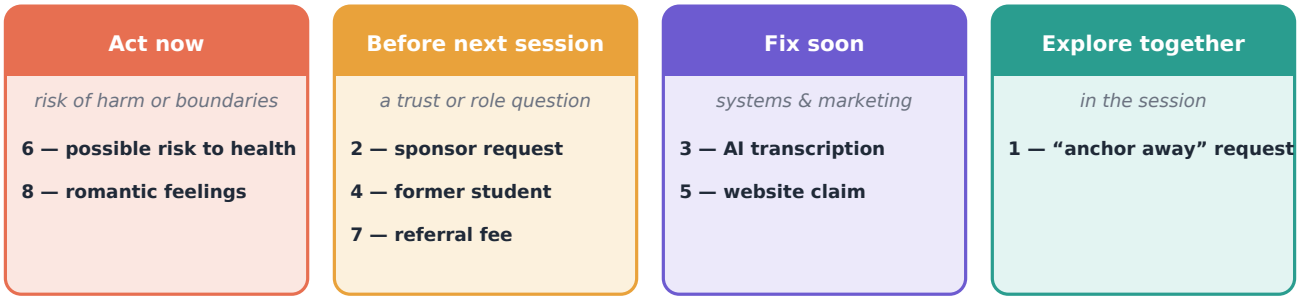


Figure 13. The scenarios above sorted by urgency (a suggested triage, not an ICF rule).

SECTION 16

Case Study 1: The Sponsor Who Wants to Know

Business coaching · three-way agreement · confidentiality

The situation

Maya, an NLP-trained executive coach, is coaching Daniel, a senior manager, under a six-session contract paid for by his company. After session three, the HR director emails: ***"Is Daniel committed to staying? We're deciding on a promotion. Please share your view on his attitude."*** *In session, Daniel had mentioned he was considering other job offers.*

Consideration	Analysis
Who is the client?	Daniel. The company is the sponsor.
What was agreed?	The three-way agreement allowed reporting of attendance and broad development themes only.
Relevant standards	1.1 (agreement), 2.1–2.2 (confidentiality and information sharing), 3.1–3.3 (conflicts of interest)
Risks	Breaching trust; harming Daniel's career; damaging the sponsor relationship; Maya's reputation

Options

Option	Assessment
A. Share what Daniel said about other offers	**Unethical** — breaches confidentiality and the agreement
B. Ignore the email	**Weak** — damages the sponsor relationship; misses a chance to clarify
C. Reply that you can't share session content; remind HR of the agreement; offer a three-way meeting	**Recommended** — honours the agreement and respects the sponsor
D. Tell Daniel about the request and explore whether he wants to talk to HR himself	**Recommended alongside C** — transparency and client autonomy

Learning point

A clear three-way agreement at the start is the best prevention. Maya can also use an NLP perceptual-positions exercise in supervision to understand HR's concerns before replying.

SECTION 17

Case Study 2: When Coaching Isn't Enough

Personal coaching · scope of practice · referral

The situation

Leo books a life coaching package with Sam, a newly certified NLP Practitioner. His goal is "more confidence at work". In session two, Leo describes panic attacks, says he's barely sleeping and mentions a car accident last year that he "can't stop replaying". He asks Sam to use the "fast phobia cure" he saw online.

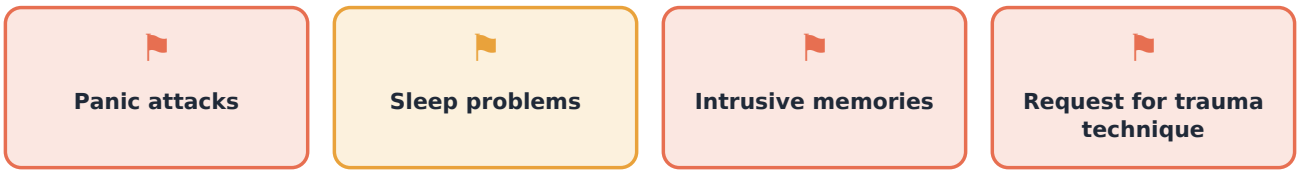


Figure 14. Red flags in Leo's session.

Step	What Sam does	Standard
1	Listens with care; doesn't start any technique	4.1, 4.2
2	Shares concern honestly: "What you're describing sounds really hard, and it may be something a specialist can help with more than I can."	4.3
3	Explains the difference between coaching and therapy	1.1
4	Encourages Leo to see his doctor, who can refer him to evidence-based support	4.3, 5.1
5	Agrees whether coaching pauses or continues alongside treatment, on goals unrelated to the trauma	1.1, 1.2
6	Takes the case to supervision	4.2

Why not try the technique?

Recognised, evidence-based treatments for trauma symptoms exist (such as trauma-focused CBT and EMDR) and are delivered by qualified clinicians. NLP certificates do not qualify a coach to treat trauma.

SECTION 18

Case Study 3: Claims, Roles and the Business of Coaching

Marketing · multiple roles · conflicts of interest

The situation

Priya runs a successful NLP coaching business and also sells NLP Practitioner courses. Her landing page says: ***"Transform your life in 3 sessions — guaranteed. Our clients overcome anxiety, phobias and limiting beliefs for good."*** *She often suggests to coaching clients that they "really should" take her course, and offers clients a discount if they refer friends.*

Issue	Standard	Concern	Ethical alternative
"Guaranteed" transformation	5.2	Inaccurate claim; no outcome can be guaranteed	Describe the process and what clients can expect
"Overcome anxiety, phobias"	5.1, 5.2	Implies clinical treatment	Focus on coaching goals; mention referral for clinical issues
Selling courses to coaching clients	3.1, 3.7, 4.1	Conflict of interest; power imbalance	Keep roles separate; disclose; never make it a condition
Referral discounts	3.8	Benefit for referrals must be disclosed	Disclose clearly in the agreement
Testimonials	5.2	Selective stories can mislead	Use genuine, consented testimonials; avoid cure language

Rewriting the claim

BEFORE

"Transform your life in 3 sessions — guaranteed. Overcome anxiety and phobias for good."

AFTER

"Coaching to help you clarify goals, build confidence and take action — using NLP-informed tools. Results vary; I'll refer you if another service would serve you better."

Figure 15. Marketing that respects standard 5.2.

SECTION 19

Self-Assessment, Cheat Sheet & Resources

Ethics self-check (tick what's in place)

- ☐ I have a written coaching agreement covering confidentiality, its limits, fees and ending
- ☐ I explain NLP methods and get consent before using them, including touch
- ☐ I know my referral criteria and have referral contacts
- ☐ My marketing makes no guarantees or clinical claims
- ☐ I disclose all other roles and any referral fees
- ☐ I have consent and secure systems for notes, recordings and AI tools
- ☐ I have regular supervision or peer reflection
- ☐ I have read the current ICF Code of Ethics this year

Situation	First thing to check
Sponsor asks for information	The three-way agreement (2.2)
Client may need therapy	Your scope and referral path (4.3, 5.1)
Using a powerful NLP technique	Informed consent and your training (1.1, 5.1)
New tech or AI tool	Consent and data security (2.4, 2.5)
Dual relationship	Disclosure and boundaries (3.1, 3.7)
Writing marketing copy	Accuracy of claims (5.2)

Resources

Resource	Why use it
ICF Code of Ethics (2025) — coachingfederation.org	The official wording of all standards
ICF Core Competencies (2025 update)	What good coaching looks like
ICF ethics resources and Ethics Assist	Confidential guidance on dilemmas
EMCC / AC Global Code of Ethics	A complementary international code
Your coaching supervisor	Ongoing ethical reflection