



Board of Behavioral Sciences

Memo

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To: Committee Members

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Subject: Discussion of the Practices of Life Coaching and Pastoral Counseling

The law requires a valid and active license or registration in order to provide services within the scope of practice of the Board's practice acts, unless an individual is working in an exempt setting (defined as a school, college, university, governmental entity, or an institution that is both nonprofit and charitable).

However, questions often arise about the legality and scope of practice for two professions that are not regulated by the Board: life coaching, and pastoral counseling. The Board may wish to discuss whether clarifications to the law might be helpful.

Life Coaching

The Board's practice acts do not discuss life coaching. Life coaches are not regulated by any governmental entity. They are, however, prohibited from practicing in the scopes of practice of the professions regulated by the Board (Business and Professions Code (BPC) §§[4980.02](#) for LMFTs, [4989.14](#) for LEPs, [4996.9](#) for LCSWs, and [4999.20](#) for LPCCs).

A number of questions can arise for the Board, its licensees and stakeholders, and consumers regarding the practice of life coaching:

1. What is the difference between life coaching and the professions regulated by the Board?
2. What can the Board do if its practice acts are violated?
3. What constitutes evidence that a life coach is violating the Board's practice acts?
4. How do consumers know the difference between life coaches and licensed therapists?

References A and B contain discussions of the distinction between life coaching and therapy.

Pastoral Counseling

Pastoral counselors are specifically exempted in statute from the Board's LMFT and LPCC practice acts as follows (BPC §§ 4980.01(b), 4999.22(c):

This chapter shall not apply to any priest, rabbi, or minister of the gospel of any religious denomination when performing counseling services as part of their pastoral or professional duties, or to any person who is admitted to practice law in the state, or a physician and surgeon who provides counseling services as part of their professional practice.

For LCSWs, pastoral counselors are exempted in statute as follows (BPC §4996.13):

Nothing in this article shall prevent qualified members of other professional groups from doing work of a psychosocial nature consistent with the standards and ethics of their respective professions. However, they shall not hold themselves out to the public by any title or description of services incorporating the words psychosocial, or clinical social worker, or that they shall not state or imply that they are licensed to practice clinical social work. These qualified members of other professional groups include, but are not limited to, the following:

(a) A physician and surgeon certified pursuant to Chapter 5 (commencing with Section 2000).

(b) A psychologist licensed pursuant to Chapter 6.6 (commencing with Section 2900).

(c) Members of the State Bar of California.

(d) Marriage and family therapists licensed pursuant to Chapter 13 (commencing with Section 4980).

(e) Licensed professional clinical counselors pursuant to Chapter 16 (commencing with Section 4999.10).

(f) A priest, rabbi, or minister of the gospel of any religious denomination.

It may be helpful to further clarify the conditions under which counseling by pastors is exempted from the Board's practice acts.

Recommendation

Conduct an open discussion regarding the practices of life coaching and pastoral counseling.

References

Reference A: Life Coaching Article: [CAMFT Article: Coaching vs Therapy \(by Sara Jasper, JD; July 1, 2015\)](#)

Reference B: Life Coaching Article: [Aboujaoude E. Where Life Coaching Ends and Therapy Begins: Toward a Less Confusing Treatment Landscape. *Perspect Psychol Sci.* 2020 Jul;15\(4\):973-977. doi: 10.1177/1745691620904962. Epub 2020 Apr 21.](#)