

Coaching Conversations About Joy

A Companion Guide for Coaches

By Gloria Custodio, Esq., PCC | The Social Leadership Coach

Inspired by Gloria's article "The Right to Joy: Coaching Clients Who've Been Told They Don't Deserve It," published in choice Magazine, Vol. 23 No. 4 (2025)

What to Look for When Coaching for Joy

Joy work does not ask more of coaches than other approaches, but it does tend to **expose us**. Conversations about joy often bring our own histories, assumptions, and ambivalence closer to the surface. Many of us carry complicated relationships with joy shaped by culture, identity, loss, responsibility, or messages about who gets to feel ease and when.

When clients speak about joy, or their distance from it, coaches may notice subtle internal movements: a pull to encourage, a reflex to soothe, a desire to protect hope, or discomfort when joy and suffering sit side by side. These responses are human. Left unexamined, they can quietly steer the work.

This guide is meant to be a companion for those moments. It names five common pitfalls in joy-focused coaching and invites reflection so we can stay with the client's experience rather than our own impulses. When we do that, joy has a better chance of emerging on the client's terms, grounded, honest, and intact.

1. Rushing to Gratitude

The pitfall: Moving too quickly from pain to appreciation, perspective, or "what's good."

What may be driving it: A coach's own discomfort with sitting in suffering, or a desire to help the client feel better quickly.

Pause and reflect:

- What sensations arise in me when the client stays with pain?

- Am I trying to relieve their discomfort, or my own?

Practice reorientation: Stay with the hard moment until it feels respected rather than managed. Trust that balance develops when pain has been fully received.

2. Turning Joy Into Homework

The pitfall: Assigning joy practices as tasks, habits, or goals to complete.

What may be driving it: A belief that progress requires action, or anxiety about “doing enough” as a coach.

Pause and reflect:

- Where did I learn that insight must be followed by an assignment?

- Am I privileging productivity over presence here?

Practice reorientation: Offer joy as an experiment or invitation. Let curiosity, not obligation, carry the work forward.

3. Over-Spiritualizing the Experience

The pitfall: Framing joy as transcendent, elevated, or inherently meaningful.

What may be driving it: A preference for abstraction, or a comfort with meaning-making that bypasses the body and the ordinary.

Pause and reflect:

- Do I value certain forms of joy more than others?

- Am I unintentionally signaling that “small” joy is insufficient?

Practice reorientation: Affirm everyday joy. Physical ease, familiarity, and moments of simple pleasure are legitimate and often more accessible.

4. Minimizing Suffering

The pitfall: Suggesting, implicitly or explicitly, that accessing joy diminishes the seriousness of the client’s hardship.

What may be driving it: A belief that joy and pain cannot coexist, or a desire to protect hope.

Pause and reflect:

- Do I feel uneasy when joy appears alongside unresolved pain?

- What assumptions do I hold about what healing should look like?

Practice reorientation: Hold joy and suffering as simultaneous truths. Joy can offer spaciousness without erasing what still hurts.

5. Projecting Your Definition of Joy

The pitfall: Steering clients toward what joy looks like for you.

What may be driving it: Identification, resonance, or the quiet pull of our own unexamined preferences.

Pause and reflect:

- Whose joy feels familiar to me, and whose feels foreign?
- Where might culture, class, race, or identity be shaping my expectations?

Practice reorientation: Let clients define joy in their own words, rhythms, and textures. Your task is to listen deeply enough to recognize it when it appears.

A Final Reflection for Coaches

Joy work calls for restraint as much as encouragement. When we slow ourselves down, question our reflexes, and stay present to what is actually unfolding, joy becomes an opening rather than a demand.

This is not gentler coaching. It is more ethical coaching.

What would it look like to model joy in my coaching presence?

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