

# choice

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COACHING  
TO  
*Unlock  
Joy*

# THE RIGHT TO JOY

Coaching clients who've been told they don't deserve it

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A few years ago, I sat with someone who quietly admitted, "I don't think joy is for me." Their words carried no drama, just resignation. It was as if joy belonged to other people – people with more freedom, less history, fewer scars.

Many clients carry this unspoken narrative. It comes from systemic oppression, inherited family beliefs, cultural expectations, or years of burnout. Somewhere along the way, they learned to shrink, to

survive, and to silence the desire for joy. In coaching, these beliefs sometimes surface in a whisper, sometimes in a burst of grief. And when they do, we are invited to sit with something radical: joy as a birthright.

As coaches, our role is not to prescribe joy, but to help clients remember that it belongs to them. Not as an indulgence, but as resilience. Not as a distraction, but as fuel. This article offers practical frameworks, questions and coaching moves to help you recognize where joy gets blocked – and how to guide clients in reclaiming it.

## HOW JOY GETS BLOCKED

Joy gets blocked in ways that are both personal and systemic. For some, it's the voice of internalized oppression: "Don't get too loud, don't shine too brightly, don't ask for more than your share." For others, it's the relentless pace of work, where exhaustion leaves no space for delight. And for many, it's the story inherited from family or culture that joy must be earned, and only after every responsibility has been met.

There are quieter blocks, too: perfectionism that insists nothing is ever enough; guilt that equates joy with selfishness; or fear that

if joy is allowed in, it will be taken away. In coaching sessions, these often surface as hesitation when clients quickly downplay what brings them delight, or as an inability to name joy at all. The absence of language becomes evidence of how thoroughly joy has been silenced.

This is why it helps to distinguish joy from happiness. Happiness is often circumstantial: a good day, a small success,

## How to Hold a Coaching Conversation About Joy

**Conversations about joy can feel tender. Clients may fear it sounds frivolous, or worry they'll be judged for wanting more. A simple frame can help:**

**Open with Permission.** Ask directly about joy: "What role does joy play in your life right now?" Even naming it signals that joy is a legitimate focus for coaching.

**Explore with Curiosity.** Listen for both the longings and the hesitations. What blocks, beliefs, or tentative steps show up in their story?

**Normalize the Struggle.** Many clients have been told joy is undeserved. Naming this pattern reduces shame and makes room for experimentation.

**Close with Choice.** Invite the client to identify one small action to welcome joy in the week ahead.

Held this way, a joy conversation becomes more than light talk. It becomes a doorway into resilience, worthiness and possibility.

a lucky break. Joy, on the other hand, is relational. It arises when we feel aligned with ourselves and connected with others. Unlike happiness, it isn't as dependent on external events, though it can be harder to access when old narratives tell us we don't deserve it.

Before we can unlock joy with our clients, we must first help them name the forces that silence it. When they can recognize those voices as learned instead of innate, they can begin to choose differently.

### UNLOCKING JOY THROUGH COACHING

Coaching for joy often begins with permission. Many clients have never been asked directly about joy. Naming it as a valid coaching outcome can be transformative. For clients who have internalized the belief that joy is frivolous or undeserved, even the invitation to imagine it can feel radical.

But permission alone is not enough. Coaches need a way to meet clients where they are. That's why I use what I call the Joy Spectrum – a simple framework that helps clients locate themselves and allows us to design coaching accordingly. By naming these stages, we give clients non-judgmental language for their current reality and a starting point for coaching conversations.

- **Absent:** "I don't think joy is for me."
- **Distant:** "I remember joy, but I can't feel it now."
- **Conditional:** "I can have joy only if everything is okay."
- **Tentative:** "I'm experimenting with small joy."
- **Integrated:** "Joy is part of my daily life."

Clients usually recognize their place on the spectrum immediately. Naming it reduces shame: "Oh, I'm not broken; I'm just distant from joy right now." The coach's role is not to rush them "up the ladder," but to honor their current reality and explore what's possible from there.

■ **If Joy Feels Absent:** The coaching task is to create safety. Sometimes the first step is giving clients permission not to feel joy yet. Silence, grief or even anger may need to come first.

■ **If Joy Feels Distant:** Invite clients to remember joy's texture – what it felt like in their body when it last appeared. Visualization and storytelling can reawaken dormant pathways.

■ **If Joy Feels Conditional:** Challenge limiting beliefs. Ask what might change if joy were not contingent on perfect circumstances. Explore the possibility of both/and holding sorrow and joy together.

■ **If Joy Feels Tentative:** Celebrate and reinforce experiments. Help clients anchor joy in their bodies and create micro-practices they can repeat, such as journaling, rituals, or sharing joy with a trusted person.

■ **If Joy Feels Integrated:** Support sustainability. Explore how joy might fuel leadership, resilience or community. Ask how they can share their practices outward, extending joy beyond themselves.

One client placed themselves in the "distant" stage. They spoke of once loving music but hadn't sung in years. Through gentle exploration, they began humming again while cooking, then singing in the car. Eventually, they joined a local choir. The shift was not about hitting "integrated joy" overnight, but about recognizing joy as present, even when imperfect.

When we use the spectrum, we normalize joy as a journey rather than a state. This simple reframing helps clients see joy as accessible, not because life has changed, but because their relationship to joy has.

Questions to help clients reclaim joy:

1. When was the last time you felt joy in your body?
2. What beliefs come up when you imagine choosing joy?
3. Who taught you what joy "should" look like?
4. What would change if joy were allowed to belong to you?

### JOY, SUFFERING & GRATITUDE

However, unlocking joy doesn't mean life suddenly becomes easy. Many clients wonder how joy can be possible when they are also carrying deep suffering. The truth is, joy and suffering are not oppo-

sites; they coexist. Joy is what keeps us human in the midst of hardship. It is what allows grief to be carried without erasing everything else.

For clients who've been told their role is to endure, not to thrive, gratitude is often weaponized: "Be grateful you have anything at all." This is what some call "toxic gratitude," where clients feel pressured to dismiss their pain because others "have it worse." Coaching can reframe gratitude as authentic rather than obligatory – an awareness that honors the hard while still noticing what is nourishing.

In this balance, clients discover that joy is not denial. It is presence. It is a way of insisting on aliveness even when life is complicated.

### JOY AS SPIRITUAL/ COLLECTIVE PRACTICE

Clients who've been told they don't deserve joy often feel isolated in that belief. Exploring joy as spiritual or collective reminds them they are not alone. Joy is bigger than personal circumstance. It is connection, resistance and medicine.

## Coaching can reframe gratitude as authentic rather than obligatory – an awareness that honors the hard while still noticing what is nourishing.

For some, joy is spiritual. Not necessarily religious, but expansive: a sense of connection to something larger, to nature, creativity, community, or moments of transcendence that remind us we are more than our wounds.

In marginalized communities, joy is often described as resistance. Laughing, singing, dancing, thriving – these are acts that defy oppression. Coaching can honor joy not only as personal practice, but as collective medicine.

Encouraging clients to explore practices that root them in connection, whether it's shared rituals, art, or community, can deepen their capacity for joy and remind them that joy is not a privilege for a select few. It is a right we hold together.

### THE TAKEAWAY

Every client has the right to joy. That doesn't mean joy will be easy or constant. It does mean joy is possible. Always possible.

As coaches, we don't deliver joy. What we do is hold space for clients to reclaim what was always theirs. And when that happens, something powerful unfolds. Coaching that unlocks joy strengthens individuals, yes, but it also strengthens communities. Joy ripples outward. It invites connection, courage and creativity.

Joy is not frivolous; it is fuel. Joy is resilience, belonging and birthright. Holding that truth in our coaching means unlocking joy not only for one client, but for the communities they touch and for the collective future we are helping to build. ●

## Coaching for Joy in Four Dimensions

**Joy is multi-layered. Clients often approach it as a fleeting feeling, but coaching can reveal it as a practice that touches every part of life. Here's a framework for exploring joy in four dimensions.**

### 1. Inner Dimension (Self-worth)

**Coaching Lens:** Many clients block joy because they believe they don't deserve it.

**Ask:** "What would change if joy were something you were inherently worthy of, not something you had to earn?"

**Practice:** Write a daily affirmation: "I am allowed to feel joy, even now."

### 2. Relational Dimension (Connection)

**Coaching Lens:** Joy is magnified in relationships, yet shame or fear often keep clients from sharing it.

**Ask:** "Who in your life makes space for your joy? Who dims it?"

**Practice:** Encourage clients to share one joy with someone safe each day.

### 3. Contextual Dimension (Systems & Culture)

**Coaching Lens:** Oppression, bias and cultural narratives tell some people their joy is inappropriate or dangerous.

**Ask:** "Whose permission have you been waiting for to feel joy?"

**Practice:** Invite clients to identify one systemic message about joy that they're ready to question or rewrite.

### 4. Transcendent Dimension (Spiritual/Collective)

**Coaching Lens:** Joy is more than a private feeling. It can be spiritual, communal, even political.

**Ask:** "When have you felt part of something larger than yourself and joyful in that connection?"

**Practice:** Suggest collective rituals: singing, art-making, community gatherings.

Exploring joy across these four dimensions reminds clients that joy is not fragile or frivolous. It is personal and collective, inner and outer, grounded and transcendent. This wider frame helps clients reclaim joy as a practice of wholeness and belonging.