



## Eating Disorder Recovery Coaching: A New Ally on the Treatment Team

By Sarah Rzemieniak, Carolyn Costin Institute™-Certified Eating Disorder Recovery Coach, with Carolyn Costin, MA, MEd, MFT, founder of The Carolyn Costin Institute™ Coach Training Program

Having struggled with and recovered from my own eating disorder I remember how painfully difficult the daily challenges of recovery were – how, despite my best intentions when leaving my therapist or dietitian’s office, following through on my goals often felt like an impossible task.

I fully believe that the inpatient program I attended and the compassionate, skilled, and dedicated clinicians with whom I worked saved my life. However, I also remember longing to have someone by my side who had been through it themselves, who could provide support and guidance for the day-to-day challenges, and to whom I could ask personal questions – *Was it like this for you? What helped you? Does it ever get easier?*

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When I finally recovered I had a desire to give back and help those still on this journey. After working for several years as a Registered Dietitian, I discovered that certification exists to become an eating disorder recovery coach and I knew this was the direction I wanted to take. I have been practicing as a recovery coach since 2018 after obtaining certification from The Carolyn Costin Institute™ (CCI™), and I am so grateful to be invited to share about this work with you today.

### WHAT RECOVERY COACHING IS AND HOW IT HELPS

Because recovery coaching is quite new to the eating disorders field, at least in a more organized sense (the first certification program of any kind was established in 2013), I think it is important to clarify what it is and how it helps.

In our coach training with CCI™ my peers and I were carefully taught what is in our scope of practice and what is not, and how our work complements and is never meant to replace that of therapists, dietitians, or anyone else on the client’s treatment team. CCI™-certified coaches are taught to work as an adjunct, carrying out the goals set by the dietitian and/or therapist. However, as recovery coaching is not yet regulated, there is no standard definition of the coach’s role or their scope of practice.

The training at The CCI™ teaches coaches to focus on the “How” of recovery instead of “Why” the person became sick. Coaches help individuals change their behaviour by working with them in the trenches, here and now. As I explain it to my clients, my job is to help them implement the work they are doing with their treatment providers into their daily lives. I work with clients’ day-to-day recovery challenges, using exposure and response prevention during meal support and fear food challenges, and I provide between-session, in-the-moment text support.

By helping clients implement important behavioural goals, coaches facilitate the work of other members of the treatment team, who can maintain their focus on addressing underlying issues and overall psychological and nutrition-related concerns.

When eating disorder recovery coaches have lived through an eating disorder, appropriate training can help ensure that they use their personal experience in a way that best supports clients, inspires hope, and avoids common pitfalls.

Finally, coaching provides flexibility that is often otherwise unavailable as coaches can provide services virtually by video and text to anywhere in the world and are not limited by geographical licensing regulations. Some CCI™-certified coaches even offer live-in services.

Of note, my definition of recovery coaching is grounded in my training with CCI™ and so others' definitions and scopes of practice may vary based on their training, background (some may also be therapists, dietitians, or other professions), and personal philosophies. Reading through each coach's personal website and speaking with them on a consult call can help determine a good fit.

While currently there are no peer-reviewed studies on the efficacy of coaching, there are articles in online publications such as Eating Disorder Hope<sup>1</sup>, The Huffington Post<sup>2</sup>, Medium<sup>3</sup> and Psych Central Professional<sup>4</sup>, as well as the blogs and testimonial pages of many recovery coaches. In these, the benefits of recovery coaching for both clients and clinicians mirror what I have found in my own practice and described above.

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In the words of Carolyn Costin, whose passion for and belief in recovery coaching led her to found The CCI™ Coach Training Program: “Coaching, which has existed for quite a while helping individuals suffering from chemical dependency, is long overdue in the eating disorder field. Eating disorder coaches are now starting to fill the gap in recovery services that licensed professionals don't have the time or are ethically or legally not permitted to do.”

### WHAT RECOVERY COACHING IS NOT

To explain what recovery coaching is, it is also helpful to explain what it is not.

One question often asked is how recovery coaching differs from psychotherapy. To answer, I find it helpful to use this chart created by Carolyn Costin:

COMPARING THE TWO TYPES OF SUPPORT	
THERAPY	COACHING
Can diagnose and treat eating disorders.	Does not diagnose conditions or treat them. Instead, helps support the work and goals of the clients clinicians.
Can diagnose and treat other co-morbid issues (e.g. depression, anxiety, substance abuse, etc.)	Refers to the therapist for treatment of any co-morbid issues (eg. depression, anxiety, substance abuse, etc.)
Therapists are trained to help clients work on underlying issues exploring WHY the eating disorder might have developed.	Coaches are trained to work only on the “here and now” helping the clients accomplish day-to-day behaviour challenges.
Therapy sessions are generally one hour and take place in an office setting.	Coaching sessions can be held anywhere, anytime the client needs them – in the home, at the grocery store, at the clothing store, at work, at school, at restaurants, etc. and coaches can be hired for 24/7 live-ins.
Therapists are in charge of ongoing assessment, establishing treatment goals and carrying out the overall treatment plan.	Coaches assist clients in accomplishing established treatment goals.

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In addition, while coaches provide meal support and eat fear foods with clients, help with grocery shopping and menu planning, and discuss nutrition goals, they are not a replacement for a dietitian. Coaches do not provide meal plans or specific nutrition-related advice, but rather offer support, guidance, and accountability to help clients put into practice the work they are doing with their dietitian into their daily lives.

## HOW DOES ONE BECOME A RECOVERY COACH?

Because coaching is not a regulated field, anyone can in fact call themselves a recovery coach.

As of this writing there are two certification programs for eating disorder recovery coaching: [The Carolyn Costin Institute™](#) and [The Eating Disorder Intuitive Therapy \(EDIT\)™ certification](#). The CCI™ requires that individuals have a Bachelor's degree (waivers are accepted for a strong equivalent background) and those with an eating disorder history must be fully recovered, according to [Carolyn Costin's definition](#)<sup>5</sup>, for two years or more in order to ensure the best experience for clients as well as coaches. The CCI™ website<sup>6</sup> states that it is “the first to offer a sophisticated, thorough, rigorous certification program” and I certainly found this to be the case. With 12 modules, each requiring approximately 8 to 10 hours of work to review the assigned readings and training videos and complete the written essays and exercises, a 10-hour internship directly supervised by Carolyn, and a final exam, I found the training to be indeed in-depth and rigorous. Upon certification I felt confident in my new role.

The EDIT™ certification requires that individuals have previous training as a coach (for example, life coach or health coach) or as a health professional prior to becoming certified as an eating disorder recovery coach. More information on this training, which I have not personally undergone, can be found on its website<sup>7</sup>.

Individuals may become eating disorder recovery coaches in a variety of ways, such as by pairing their own recovery experience with training in life coaching, body image work, intuitive eating, eating psychology, or other modalities. Some may have no formal training or certification and rely solely on their lived experience and research to guide their work. Due to this wide variation in training and background it is important to explore the training and supervision of anyone working as a coach.

“ It is essential for coaches who are recovered to honour each client's unique journey. ”

It is essential for coaches who are recovered to honour each client's unique journey. A coach's personal experience can foster understanding, empathy, non-judgment, and even hope for their clients, but thorough training and

supervision helps them develop skills to recognize each client as a unique individual and to avoid projecting their own recovery experience onto clients.

## DO RECOVERY COACHES ALWAYS HAVE THEIR OWN HISTORY OF AN EATING DISORDER?

While the majority of coaches in any field tend to have their own personal experience in the area in which they practice, not everyone who is an eating disorder recovery coach has had an eating disorder themselves. Some may be the parent or caregiver of someone with an eating disorder or they may be passionate about this work for other reasons. In the CCI™ training there are two tracks: one for those with a personal history of an eating disorder and one for those without.

## WHAT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED WHEN CHOOSING A RECOVERY COACH?

Aside from the coach's training, the most important factor in choosing a recovery coach is finding someone with whom there is a strong therapeutic alliance. As a recovery coach I hope that each of my clients feels both safe with *and* appropriately challenged by me, and that they trust my ability to help them move forwards. However, as coaching is an unregulated field, below are some other things that I believe are important to consider when choosing a recovery coach, for clients as well as clinicians.

First, whether a coach has an eating disorder history or not, I believe that having relevant, thorough, eating disorder-specific training to inform their coaching work is critical. Eating disorders are serious and complex conditions and the wrong thing said or advice given can create setbacks or harm. Furthermore, if the coach has their own eating disorder history but no specific training, my concerns would be that: 1) they may believe that what helped them recover will help everyone, and may not know of other ways for working with each unique client; 2) they may not have learned guidelines for responsibly and effectively disclosing their own history; and 3) they may not fully understand their scope of practice and how it relates to that of other treatment team members, or how to convey this to clients and the treatment team so as to manage expectations, as well as to not cause harm.

In addition, if the coach has lived experience it is recommended that they are fully recovered for at least two years. This is the amount of time required to be a

CCIT™-certified coach using Carolyn Costin’s definition of recovered. In explaining this criteria, Carolyn Costin says: “I have hired, trained and worked with eating disorder therapists, dietitians and other treatment team members with a personal history of an eating disorder for over three decades. In this time I learned that establishing the necessity of those with lived experience being fully recovered for at least two years nearly eliminated the risk of the individual being triggered by clients or relapsing.” However, as there is no universally agreed-upon definition of what it means to be recovered or in strong recovery or remission (this debate is ongoing), clients or treatment team members will need to clarify with the coach and use their intuition regarding this aspect.

I also believe that it is incredibly important for the client’s healing of body image and overall recovery that the coach be fully aligned with and knowledgeable of the Health At Every Size® approach<sup>8</sup>. From my own experience in recovery, in coaching, and also learning from countless others, I have found this approach to be instrumental in helping clients become less afraid of weight gain and/or of where their unique body weight may settle. This approach can help clients experience a sense of community, and the supporting literature can be reassuring in what can feel like an upstream battle – recovering within a culture that often promotes the very behaviours and values they are working so hard to change. Of note, key eating disorder organizations such as the Academy for Eating Disorders<sup>9</sup> and the Binge Eating Disorder Association, which merged with the National Eating Disorders Association in 2018<sup>10</sup>, endorse the Health At Every Size® approach.

Lastly, for the benefit of the client, coach, and other team members, it is important that the coach gets a release to communicate with team members and collaborates closely

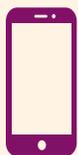
with them. It is imperative for the entire team to be on the same page in order for the recovery coach to best help the client implement their goals into daily life.

## FINAL WORDS

While recovery coaching may be relatively new to the eating disorders field, peer support and role models in the form of sponsors have been a key part of the substance use disorder community for a long time. Eating disorders are complex mental and physical illnesses whose treatment typically requires a combination of therapy, nutritional rehabilitation, medication, medical monitoring, and exposure and response prevention work. Recovery

“Recovery coaching can be a powerful and effective addition to the care team by helping clients to implement the work they are doing with their team into their daily lives and, when relevant, by providing a recovered role model.”

coaching can be a powerful and effective addition to the care team by helping clients to implement the work they are doing with their team into their daily lives and, when relevant, by providing a recovered role model. In the two years in which I have operated my recovery coaching practice (<https://sarahrzemieniak.com/>), I have enjoyed seeing the benefits of coaching and I am excited to see an increasing number of coaches joining the field. With good communication and collaboration I believe that a coach’s passion for this work and often their own healing journeys can be a valuable asset to both clinicians and clients alike. I greatly hope you will find this to be the case.



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## REFERENCES

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