A Systematic Literature Review of Inter-sessional Activities (SLR) in coaching practice: What can we learn from counselling and therapy?

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Abstract

Purpose

Although coaching is widely adopted in organisational and HRD contexts, inter-sessional activities (IA) or “homework” activities carried out between sessions remain under-examined. This study investigates how IA is applied in workplace coaching and assesses its effectiveness in enhancing programme outcomes.

Design

A systematic review was conducted across coaching and related disciplines, following the PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency and methodological rigour. The search identified 7 empirical studies in workplace coaching and 43 in therapy and counselling that met the inclusion criteria.

Results

Five themes emerged: (1) inconsistent terminology and definitions of IA, (2) evidence of positive effects on behavioural and attitudinal outcomes, (3) wide variation in the types of activities assigned, (4) mixed perceptions of IA among practitioners and clients, and (5) factors influencing clients’ adherence and completion.

Originality

This review is the first to synthesise empirical evidence on IA within coaching, revealing a substantial research gap despite practitioners’ routine use of these activities. By mapping existing findings and identifying conceptual ambiguities, the study establishes a clear agenda for future research and offers practical guidance on embedding IA within a strong coach–client working alliance to maximise coaching effectiveness.

Keywords: coaching, homework assignments, inter-sessional activities, workplace coaching, systematic literature review

Introduction

Over the past three decades coaching has become a mainstream organisational intervention. The term *coaching* is applied variably, from a managerial communication style (Simons, 2021) to a formal developmental programme delivered by accredited practitioners (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011; Wang, 2018, 2021). Generally, coaching is a partnership with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential (Greif, 2025). In this paper, coaching is defined as "a Socratic, future-focused dialogue between a facilitator (coach) and a participant in which open questions, active listening, summaries, and reflections stimulate self-awareness and personal responsibility" (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011, p. 74).

Scholarly interest has grown alongside practice, and workplace coaching is now recognised as an evidence-based method for behavioural change and performance improvement (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018). The Association for Talent Development (ATD) underscored its importance by adding coaching to the 2025 competency framework for learning and performance professionals (ATD, 2025). Expansion has accelerated since 2020 through digital platforms such as EZRA and BetterUp, driving sharp increases in practitioner numbers and market value (International Coaching Federation, ICF, 2023). Coaching now permeates human-resource development, from executive and managerial programmes to skill building for junior staff (Ellinger and Kim, 2014; Passmore *et al*., 2019; Terblanche, 2021).

Although the collaborative and nuanced nature of the coaching relationships and core micro-skills, such as provocative questioning, deep listening, and model selection, are well documented (Bachkirova et al., 2016; de Hann and Gannon, 2017; Graßmann *et al*., 2019; Passmore and Sinclair, 2020), far less attention has been paid to inter-session activities (IA). Often labelled "homework", "between-session activities" or "experiments",

IA encompass any structured task undertaken by the client between sessions. For clarity, the term IA is used throughout this study.

The Theoretical Underpinnings of IA

Inter-session activities (IA) draw on three major theoretical traditions. The first originates in behavioural experiments (BE) developed within cognitive therapy in the 1960s and 1970s (Bennett-Levy et al., 2004). BE are planned experiential tasks completed during or between sessions to test the validity of clients' beliefs and construct more adaptive alternatives, thereby refining the cognitive formulation. Cognitive theory posits that both the content and process of thought influence emotion, behaviour, and physiological response (Beck et al., 1979; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). IA serve this model by helping clients identify automatic thoughts, surface underlying assumptions, trace core beliefs and challenge dysfunctional schemas. IA tasks commonly include guided discovery (Beck et al., 1979), self-monitoring of automatic thoughts (Greenberger and Padesky, 1995), graded assignments, psychodrama techniques and behavioural experiments.

The second foundation derives from experiential, action and adult-learning theories (Lewin, 1946; Kolb, 1984; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000; Pedler at el., 2005). Experiential learning is typically conceptualised as a four-stage "Plan-Experience-Observe-Reflect" cycle, which can begin at any point and iterates to promote change (Kolb, 1984). For example, after initial reflection on an issue, the coach and client co-design an IA task (plan), the client completes it in real life (experience and observe), and then analyses its implications in the next session (reflect), leading to further planning. Each phase contributes uniquely to insight and behaviour modification (Bennett-Levy, 2003). Pedler et al. (2005) proposed that that mentoring and coaching are forms of one-to-one action learning in management and development education, where the "action coaching" helps individuals generate speculative, emancipatory and performative knowledge.

The third foundation is routed in Fitts and Posner's (1967) three stage model of learning; cognitive, associative and autonomous. The model emphasises the value of repeated practice which contributes to skill refinement, increased accuracy and promotes the movement towards automatic performance.

Together, cognitive theory supplies the conceptual rationale for restructuring belief systems, while experiential action learning provides an action-oriented process for embedding those changes and Fitt's and Posner's model captures the importance of repetition for skills automation. This integrated perspective captures the conceptual, experiential and practical nature of IA, explaining why such tasks can accelerate insight, reinforce skill acquisition and sustain behavioural change between sessions.

IA in the Different Contexts: Coaching, Counselling and Therapy

Coaching, therapy and counselling are distinct yet overlapping interventions, primarily differentiated by client needs and presenting issues (Grant, 2001). Passmore's (2021) 3D model categorises therapy as addressing the "damaged" (clinical conditions), counselling the "distressed" (emotive issues) and coaching those with a "desire" (goal-focused, high-functioning individuals). Although practical boundaries often blur, skilled coaches must navigate these ethically and effectively (Hart and Leipsic, 2001; Maxwell, 2009). Historically, executive coaching commanded significantly higher fees than therapy or counselling (Channer, 2003), but increasing coach supply has narrowed this gap, leading to greater convergence in professional rates across these fields.

Coaching, originating in sports and public speaking, is now widely used in health, wellbeing, and education, as well as a wide range of other learning environments from driver training to safety critical environments (Passmore, 2021).

Coaching can benefit from the well-established practices of psychology, particularly cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), where inter-session activities (IA) are a core component (Passmore, 2011, 2017; Beck, 2011; Jensen, 2020). Extensive research over the past three decades has demonstrated the effectiveness of IA in therapy, counselling, and clinical treatment (Kazantzis et al., 2000, 2010, 2016). IA have been

integrated into treatment approaches for a range of clinical conditions and are associated with significant improvements in therapeutic outcomes (Kazantzis, 2000, 2006). Effectively designed IA support clients in several key ways: they encourage the examination of negative beliefs, promote the adoption of more adaptive behaviours and help generalize therapeutic gains to everyday situations (Beck et al., 1979). Moreover, completing IA and receiving supportive feedback can enhance clients' self-efficacy and reinforce positive behavioural change (Kazantzis et al., 2005). These mechanisms highlight how IA function not only as tools for behavioural experimentation but also as means of fostering accountability, engagement and long-term development. Given these benefits, coaching could enhance its impact by adopting evidence-based approaches to IA design and implementation from therapeutic practice.

References to inter-session activities (IA) in the coaching literature remain sparse. Waringa et al. (2020) suggest coaches to integrate IA (e.g., reflective diaries for documenting thoughts, emotions and learning) to deepen clients' self-awareness. Biswas-Diener (2023) argues that "between-session action" is indispensable to coaching accountability; the limited time and frequency of sessions require clients to test insights in real-life contexts, where genuine learning and behaviour change occur. Researchers typically classify IA into two forms: active assignments and observational assignments (Szymanska, 2009). Active assignments ask clients to experiment with new ways of thinking or acting, for example, initiating a difficult conversation using newly learned techniques. Observational assignments involve systematic monitoring, such as self-conducted surveys or feedback exercises designed collaboratively with the coach (Bennett-Levy et al., 2004). Both forms facilitate change by heightening awareness of cognitive and behavioural patterns, rehearsing problem-solving strategies and consolidating skills between sessions (Prevatt et al., 2011). For IA to be effective, they must be collaboratively framed and tailored to client goals rather than imposed unilaterally (Biswas-Diener, 2023). Thoughtful design enhances relevance, fosters ownership and ensures that inter-session work functions as a continuous bridge between coaching conversations and real-world application.

The current review

This review investigates the application and value of inter-session activities (IA) in one-on-one conversations, focusing on their role in supporting behavioural change within coaching. It explores lessons workplace coaching can learn from related fields such as counselling and therapy. The study addresses two key questions: (1) What factors contribute to the positive impact of IA in the fields of counselling, therapy and coaching? (2) How can insights from counselling and therapy inform the effective use of IA in coaching, particularly within HRD contexts?

Methods

Search Strategy

A research protocol was developed and registered with PROSPERO (CRD42023476571), detailing the methodology, target activity, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and selected databases. The systematic review was conducted across seven databases: Web of Science, Google Scholar, EBSCO, PsycINFO, PsycAbstract, PsycArticle and PubMed. The search algorithm employed Boolean operators, wildcards, and truncation, following Siddaway et al. (2019). Keywords included “homework”, “assignment”, “between-session activities” and “inter-session activities”, covering domains such as coaching, coaching psychology, mentoring, training, consulting, therapy and counselling.

The review focused on adult populations, excluding studies on children in educational contexts. Search strategies were adapted to each database’s requirements and refined iteratively. Terms were combined and expanded to capture relevant titles, abstracts, and keywords comprehensively. Only peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books were included to ensure quality.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they: (1) were published in English; (2) dated from 1995 onward, marking the emergence of coaching in scholarly literature (Passmore, 2021); (3) addressed inter-sessional activities (IA), including definitions, specific tasks, effects,

adherence or user perceptions; (4) involved coaches not requiring technical expertise in the client's domain; and (5) comprised empirical (quantitative or qualitative), theoretical, or review-based work, including journal articles, books, book chapters, and technique papers. English-language publications were selected due to team language capacities. One reviewer was monolingual and the others were fluent in English and Chinese.

Studies were excluded if they: (1) did not meet the inclusion criteria; (2) focused on non-adult populations; (3) addressed IA in sport, physical health, or educational contexts; or (4) were dissertations, reports, essays, or media articles. Educational and sports settings were excluded as the term "homework" in these domains typically relates to knowledge acquisition, differing from the coaching and therapeutic context of behaviour change and goal attainment.

Screening Procedure and Data Extraction

The review process followed PRISMA guidelines (Page *et al*., 2021). The initial search returned 1,337 records, with 64 in coaching and 1,273 in therapy/counselling. After removing 445 duplicates, 892 unique items remained. Three independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts, excluding 830 that failed to meet the inclusion criteria, and retained 62 records (9 coaching; 53 therapy/counselling).

Two subsequent rounds of full-text appraisal were completed by the same reviewers, who reached consensus through discussion. This stage reduced the corpus to 50 studies, with 7 in coaching and 43 in therapy/counselling.

A structured extraction framework, finalised during the third review round, ensured consistent data capture. Two authors extracted and coded information; two others cross-checked all entries and resolved discrepancies with the original texts.

The multi-stage screening and rigorous extraction process, is summarised in the PRISMA diagram contained in Figure 1. This produced a balanced dataset, permitting nuanced comparison of IA use across coaching and therapeutic contexts while maintaining methodological rigor and transparency.

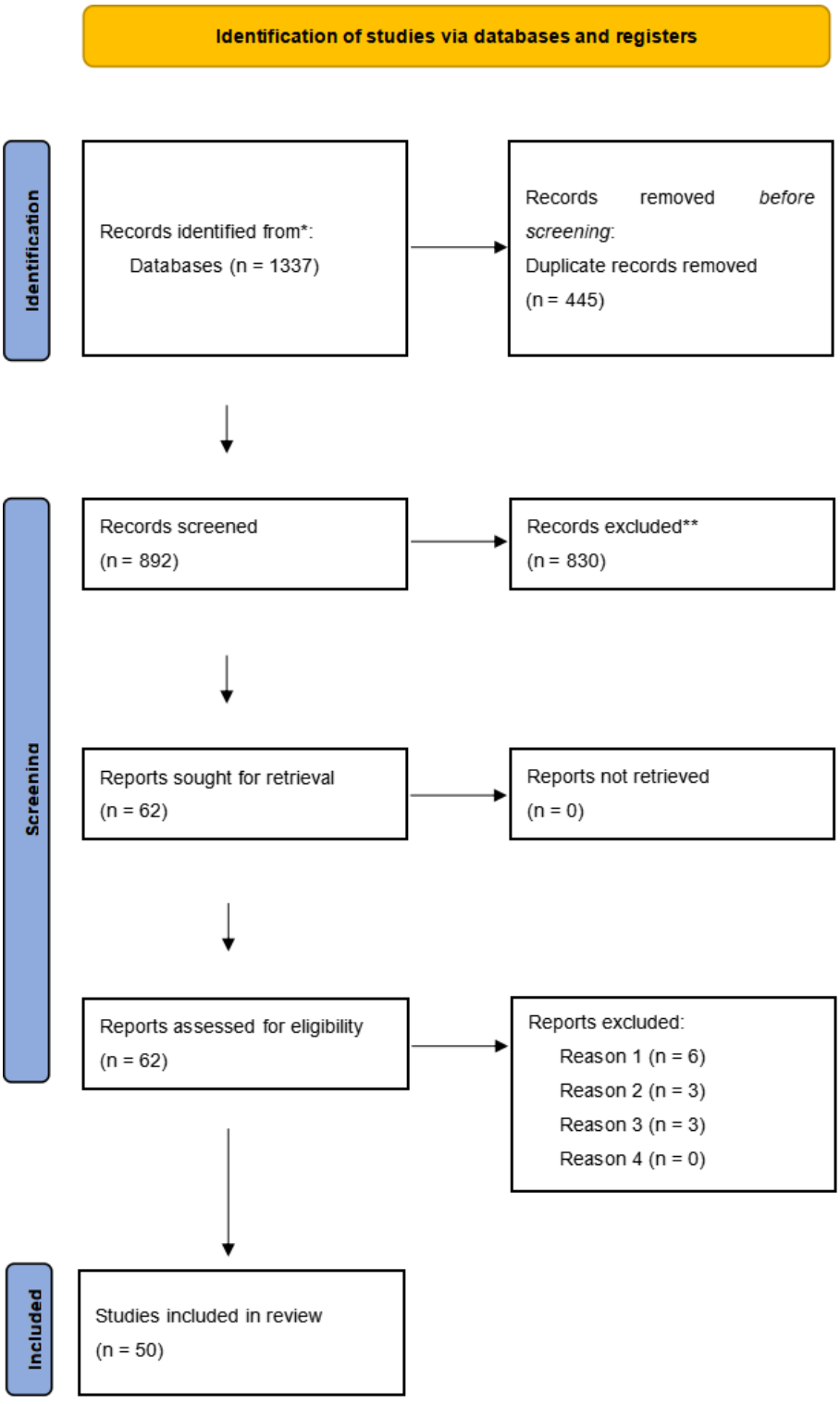

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Screening Process (from Page *et al*., 2021)

Extracted variables were:

1. Publication details (year, authors, country)
2. Domain (coaching vs. therapy/counselling)
3. Publication type (systematic review, meta-analysis, empirical paper, technique article, theoretical piece, book/chapter)
4. Participants (e.g., clinical patients, coaching clients, employees)
5. Methodology and design (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods; use of RCT)
6. Intervention orientation (e.g., CBT, CBC, person-centred)
7. Inter-session activity characteristics (number of sessions, implementation method, specific tasks)
8. Principal findings (effects of IA, key arguments)

Given the scarcity of coaching studies addressing inter-session activities (IA), every eligible coaching paper was included to maximise available evidence. In therapy and counselling, priority was given to systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and empirical work, especially randomised controlled trials (RCTs). Five therapy/counselling papers employed RCT designs that treated IA as the primary variable, providing critical insight into its efficacy.

Risk of Bias and Quality Assessment

Addressing publication bias is essential in this review of inter-sessional activities (IA), as the evidence base is often distorted by the overrepresentation of positive outcomes and underreporting of null findings (Rothstein et al., 2005; Scheel et al., 2021). To mitigate this risk and examine selective reporting (Hopewell et al., 2005), our comprehensive search strategy encompassed both mainstream databases (e.g., Web of Science) and

grey literature (e.g., Google Scholar). Furthermore, we enhanced retrieval of underreported studies by incorporating diverse keywords related to IA, explicitly including terms such as “null findings” and “negative results”. While prioritizing peer-reviewed journal articles to ensure methodological quality (Brembs, 2018), we maintained openness to studies reporting non-significant results during the screening phase.

We assessed the quality of all included studies using the Quality Assessment Tool for Studies with Diverse Designs (QATSDD) (Sirriyeh et al., 2012), which is suitable for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research. QATSDD features 16 criteria, such as “Explicit theoretical framework” and “Detailed recruitment data”, each scored on a four-point scale (0 = Not at all, 3 = Complete). The sum of these scores, expressed as a percentage of the maximum available score, provided the overall quality rating for each paper. Crucially, two researchers conducted independent parallel quality assessments, with all disagreements resolved through discussion or escalation to a third reviewer to ensure a robust judgment on study quality.

Results

The Diversity of Definitions and Terms of IA

In coaching, discussion of inter-session activities (IA) is notably limited. Prevatt (2011) defines IA as self-help tasks between sessions designed to enhance treatment by fostering awareness of thought patterns and behaviours, and by exploring and practicing solutions. According to Kazantzis (2010), papers (January 1980 through December 2007) use key terms of assignments, homework, homework assignments, behavioural practice, extra-therapy, extra-treatment, home practice and self-help assignments (see Table 1). Therapy-based definitions offer valuable insights for coaching, with Kazantzis (2010) emphasizing that IA should be specific, structured and therapeutic activities routinely reviewed in sessions and completed between them. IA translate in-session work into real-life contexts, helping clients address daily challenges and test new strategies (Kazantzis et al., 2005). In CBT, homework occurs within a

supportive yet challenging relationship, encouraging clients to take risks in their environment and evaluate outcomes (Dobson, 2021).

Table 1. Alternative Terminologies of IA

Term	Definition	Reference
Behavioral assignments or behavioral experiments	Active experiments involve the client testing out new ways of thinking or behaving, while observational assignments can take the form of surveys conducted by the client or both the coach and client.	Bennett-Levy et al., 2004; Palmer & Szymanska, 2007; Szymanska, 2009
Homework assignments	Homework assignments represent the translation of the in- session efforts to understand the problems faced by the client into meaningful and relevant behavioral change, and to discern strategies to try to shift these problems into solutions.	Carroll, 2005; Detweiler, 2006; Dobson, 2021; Fehm& Kazantzis, 2004; Fehm & Mrose, 2008; Jensen, 2020; Kazantzis, 2010; Kazantzis, Deane, et al., 2005; Kazantzis, Wedge, et al., 2005; Kobori, 2020; Ryum, 2021
Between session assignments	Between session assignment aims to maximize benefit from treatment by asking clients to engage in self-help tasks between sessions. They typically include assignments that facilitate different change processes.	Prevatt, 2011
Behavioral practice	No clear definition could be found	Kazantzis, 2010
Extra-therapy	No clear definition could be found	Kazantzis, 2010
Extra-treatment	No clear definition could be found	Kazantzis, 2010
Home practice	No clear definition could be found	Kazantzis, 2010
Self-help assignments	No clear definition could be found	Kazantzis, 2010

The Effects of IA in Counselling and Therapy

The literature on inter-session activities (IA) in counselling and therapy is considerably extensive, with most studies linking IA completion to improved outcomes (Al-Kubaisy et al., 1992; Bryant, 1999; Burns & Spangler, 2000; Decker, 2016; Kraepelien, 2021). Kazantzis et al. (1999) found that only 25% of psychologists used systematic homework procedures, with CBT practitioners employing IA more frequently than non-CBT practitioners. This may because of IA's problem-focused and action-oriented theoretical model that mandates client practice and test new cognitive and behavioural skills in real-life settings to facilitate skill generalization, extinguish maladaptive patterns, and promote self-management, which is a core mechanism of therapeutic change (Kazantzis et al., 1999; Kazantzis, 2007). Factors influencing IA completion include environmental, patient, task and therapist variables (Kazantzis, 2007). Recent advances highlight the role of smartphone technology in enhancing CBT homework compliance by supporting learning, guidance, and connection (Tang & Kreindler, 2017). Overall, evidence underscores that designing, assigning and completing IA are integral to effective counselling and therapy practice. A comprehensive summary of relevant studies is provided in Table 2.

Our analysis identified five randomised controlled trials (RCTs) examining the role of inter-session activities (IA) in counselling and therapy, whereas no RCTs have investigated IA effectiveness in coaching. Blanchard et al. (1991a) found no benefit from home practice of thermal biofeedback for headache reduction compared to controls. However, in a related study, the same researchers reported that CBT relaxation training combined with home practice of progressive muscle relaxation significantly alleviated tension headaches (Blanchard et al., 1991b). Al-Kubaisy et al. (1992) demonstrated that behavioural therapy patients reduced phobic symptoms more effectively when daily self-exposure homework accompanied self-exposure instructions. Carroll et al. (2005) found a positive correlation between homework completion and treatment outcomes among cocaine-dependent patients undergoing CBT, sustained over a one-year follow-up. More recently, Kraepelien et al. (2021) showed that homework quality significantly predicted insomnia reduction in CBT treatment.

Table 2. IA Studies in Coaching (n = 7)

Author, (year), Country	Publication type	Research Methodology/ Description	Intervention Method	Main Findings
Biswas-Diener, Robert., (2023), USA	Book chapter	Best practice advice - general		IA in coaching is reasonable, but it needs to be considered more carefully (critically). IA should be designed to integrate with the client's goals.

Kemmis & McTaggart., (2000), UK	Book chapter	Best practice advice - general	Handbook of qualitative research	The major theoretical foundation of IA in coaching.
Passmore & Sinclair., (2020), GER	Book chapter	Best practice advice in the application of CBC	Description of a technique (ABC) from Cognitive behavioral coaching	Specific activities for IA in coaching: Completing a ABCDE chart between sessions - its only one sentence and a table illustrating how the table could be used by a client between sessions.
Passmore, Day & Wang., (2023), UK	Empirical study	Qualitative studies (IPA)		IA, as a part of coaching intervention, may enhance the clients' learning experience.
Prevatt et al., (2011), USA	Empirical study	Mixed method	CBT	Definition of IA (Between-session assignment) Specific activities of IA in coaching Between-session-assignments can be useful in the context of ADHD coaching with college students
Szymanska, K., (2009)	Technique paper	Best practice advice in the application of CBC	Cognitive Behavioral coaching (CBC)	Specific activities of IA in coaching. IA serves to evaluate unhelpful thinking patterns, establish new behaviors and lead to emotional adjustment. Coaches' or clients' perceptions of IA: behavioral assignments can be utilized in all types of coaching with careful planning, leading to effective results.
Willson, R. (2020)., UK	Book chapter	Best practice advice in the application of CBC	Cognitive behavioral coaching (CBC)	IA has an impact on coaching outcomes. IA include a record card, behavioral experiments or practice behavioral change. It is important for the coach to check with the client on the progress as a sign of interest and encouragement.

Four meta-analyses in counselling and therapy underscore the importance of IA (Kazantzis et al., 2000, 2010, 2016; Mausbach et al., 2010). Mausbach et al. (2010) reported a small-to-moderate effect size (r = .26) linking IA compliance to improved outcomes, emphasising IA as a key psychotherapy component regardless of symptoms. Kazantzis and colleagues consistently argued that IA contributes meaningfully to client outcomes, particularly within cognitive behavioural frameworks. Meta-analytical evidence supports that diverse IA activities, such as behavioural experiments and self-monitoring, can significantly improve treatment of depression, anxiety, phobias,

obsessive-compulsive behaviours, insomnia and substance abuse (e.g., Coon and Thompson, 2003; Kobori, 2020; Abramowitz et al., 2002; Carroll, 2005). Kazantzis et al. (2017) further reinforced these conclusions through a systematic literature review, affirming IA's beneficial impact in therapy.

Activities in IA

In our review, inter-session activities (IA) broadly encompass three categories: (1) monitoring and managing cognitions and related emotions, shifting from unhelpful thoughts toward those that support goal attainment; (2) monitoring and managing behaviours to enhance self-awareness, interpersonal impact, and skilful, intentional action; and (3) observational or learning activities, such as observing others, engaging with learning materials, and reflecting on their relevance. Common IA methods include behavioural experiments, self-monitoring, cognitive restructuring, and skill application in CBT (Fehm and Kazantzis, 2004), as well as relaxation exercises, assertiveness training, and video assignments (Kazantzis, 2006). These activities facilitate cognitive, behavioural and reflective processes critical to personal development and therapeutic progress.

Views of IA from Practitioners and Clients

Attitudes toward inter-session activities (IA) vary across counselling and therapy disciplines, influenced by practitioners' backgrounds and theoretical orientations. Cognitive-behavioural therapists generally hold more positive views of homework compared to psychodynamic therapists, who emphasize therapy as confined to the therapist-client interaction (Fehm and Kazantzis, 2004; Kazantzis et al., 2005). Additionally, those affiliated with universities and research institutions tend to be more favourable toward IA (Fehm, 2004). Ryum et al. (2022) found that therapists' competence in assigning homework and establishing a strong therapeutic alliance uniquely predicted better treatment outcomes in cognitive therapy.

Most counselling and therapy clients view IA positively and actively engage in assigned tasks, recognising their benefits (Fehm, 2008). However, coaching clients often report

discomfort with IA, partly due to terminology like “homework”, which may create perceived power imbalances and reduce engagement when tasks are imposed by coaches (Passmore et al., 2023). Moreover, clients’ motivation to complete IA declines when therapists fail to follow up or review their work, as this is perceived as a lack of interest, leading to reduced engagement (Bunnell et al., 2020; Dobson, 2021).

The Factors of IA Adherence or Completion

Extensive research in therapy underscores the critical role of client compliance with inter-session activities (IA) in achieving positive treatment outcomes. Homework adherence is consistently linked to greater therapeutic gains, making it a significant predictor of success (Decker, 2016; Kazantzis *et al*., 2010, 2016). Empirical studies show that clients who follow through with IA benefit more than those who do not, a finding observed across cultures. For example, Foo and Kazantzis (2007) found that in Chinese clients, IA fostered fulfilment, commitment, self-monitoring and greater acceptance of challenges.

Despite its importance, IA adherence CBT is often suboptimal (Dobson, 2021; Wheaton and Chen, 2021). Barriers include unrealistic therapist-set goals, client-assignment mismatches, low client commitment and environments lacking positive reinforcement (Shelton and Levy, 1981). Additional obstacles involve client expectations, perfectionism, fear of failure and the desire to please others (Persons, 1989; Detweiler and Whisman, 1999).

To enhance adherence, assignments should align with clients’ key session takeaways, emphasising relevance through client feedback (Tang and Kreindler, 2017; Tompkins, 2002). Dobson (2021) highlights factors influencing adherence: therapist expertise and flexibility, client readiness and commitment and a strong therapeutic alliance. Foo and Kazantzis (2007) recommend strategies for Chinese clients, such as introducing IA early, framing them as learning activities, ensuring tasks are achievable, using pre-designed assignments, reinforcing client collaboration and adopting clear

communication. These approaches collectively promote engagement and successful IA completion.

IA Studies in Coaching

Empirical evidence from our literature analysis indicates that inter-session activities (IA) are part of coaching practice but are sparsely represented and primarily descriptive in the literature. Table 3 summarises the identified coaching studies on IA, revealing that their use is predominantly confined to cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC), closely mirroring their application in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). In coaching, IA focus on evaluating unhelpful thinking patterns, establishing new behaviours and supporting emotional adjustment, as seen in models like the ABC framework (Passmore & Sinclair, 2020) and various tools (Szymanska, 2009; Willson, 2020). Szymanska (2009) emphasized that well-planned behavioural assignments enhance coaching outcomes.

A recent qualitative study employing thematic analysis revealed that IA is more prevalent in coaching than literature suggests, though client perceptions of its value vary. Engagement and perceived usefulness depend on how coaches frame IA, the terminology used, coaches' experience managing IA, clients' responsibility and their stage in the experiential learning cycle (Passmore et al., 2023). Only one quantitative coaching study was identified, involving university students with ADHD (n = 13) receiving combined coaching and counselling. Structured IA, including goal sheets and assignments, correlated strongly with motivation at the programme's end, with higher engagement observed in males and self-paying clients. The limited coaching literature on IA is surprising given the growth in coaching research and the increasing emphasis on evidence-based practice.

Table 3. IA Studies in Counseling and Therapy (n = 43)

Author, (year), Country	Publication type	Research Methodology/ Description	Intervention Method	IA Usage	Main Findings
Al-Kubaisy et al., (1992), USA	Empirical study	Quantitative (RCT)	Behavioral therapy (BT)	Daily live self-exposure	Exposure to IA can reduce phobic symptoms

				homework for a total of 8 weeks, interspersed with 6 90-minute sessions.	
Beck et al. (1990), USA	Book chapter		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)		Homework in CBT may have a positive impact on treatment outcomes in a variety of ways, such as helping to examine negative beliefs, trying out new adaptive behaviors, and generalizing treatment effects to real life.
Beck, J. S. (2011)., USA	Book chapter		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)		IA have long been considered a central feature of CBT.
Bennett-levy et al., (2004), USA	Book chapter		Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)		The theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of IA Specific forms of activities in IA
Bennett-Levy, J. (2003), UK	Empirical study	Mixed method	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	Several weeks (About 11 weeks)	The theory of experiential learning is especially useful in the endorsement of personal change because it clarifies procedural description and emphasizes unique, personal attribution to the reflective learning.
Blanchard et al., (1991a), UAS	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies（RCT）	Thermal biofeedback (TBF) treatment	12 sessions, regular practice at home with a home trainer in between clinic sessions, and use of an exercise diary.	There was no advantage for the group receiving home practice, either in headache reduction or in acquisition of the hand-warming response.
Blanchard et al., (1991b), UAS	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (RCT)	Cognitive Behavioral therapy (CBT) Relaxation training	10 sessions, regular practice at home, and use of an exercise diary.	Home practice (Progressive Muscle Therapy) can relieve tension headaches
Bryant et al., (1999), USA	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (pre-experimental design)	Cognitive therapy (CT)	20 sessions	Patients who are more compliant with homework respond better to CT.
Bunnell et al., (2020), USA	Empirical study	Qualitative studies (Thematic Analysis)	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)		Therapists' attitudes toward homework: believe the most effective part of therapy is still the interview. Patients often do not see homework as an important part of therapy.
Burns & Spangler., (2000), USA	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (pre-experimental design)	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	Once- or twice-weekly sessions focused on changing negative self-defeating thinking and behavior patterns	In this study, homework compliance was significantly correlated with reductions in depression during treatment. Patients who did the most homework improved much more than patients who did little or no homework.

Burns, D. & Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (1992), USA	Literature review		Quantitative (factor analysis)		The willingness scale and compliance with self-help assignments made additive and separate contributions to clinical improvement.
Carroll et al., (2005), USA	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (RCT)	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	12-week treatment (The article does not specify the form of the homework activity)	Completing IA can help visitors treat substance abuse (Participants who completed more IA demonstrated significantly greater increases in the quantity and quality of their coping skills and used significantly less cocaine during treatment and through a 1-year follow-up.) The extent to which participants are willing to complete IA may be an important mediator of CBT responses.
Carroll et al., (2008), USA	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (between-subjects design)	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	8 weeks	Homework adherence has been associated with reduced cocaine use, as indicated by both self-report and cocaine-negative urine toxicology screens. There was a significant positive relationship between the number of CBT and IA completed and substance use outcomes.
Decker et al., (2016), USA	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (pre-experimental design)	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	About 12 weeks of treatment (at least 2 sessions) (The article does not specify the form of the homework activity)	Homework adherence is associated with improved outcomes for various diseases, and adherence to homework is important.
Detweiler & Whisman., (1999), USA	Literature review		Cognitive therapy (CT)		Clients who adhere to IA showed greater improvement than those who do not. The more IA completed the more depression decreased. Clients' education level and current employment were positively associated with homework adherence. Three obstacles to completing IA.
Dobson, K. S., (2021), USA	Literature review		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)		Definition and terminology of IA. The importance of IA in therapy. Factors affecting homework adherence.
Dunn et al., (2006), UK	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (pretest-posttest design)	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	4-35 sessions	Homework compliance is positively associated with the quality of the therapeutic alliance.

Fehm & Kazantzis., (2004), UK	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (survey research)	German Psychotherapists (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)/Psychoanalytic/)		Types of IA. Therapists' attitudes toward homework were generally positive. Practitioners with a CBT orientation, and those working in university or research settings, tend to have a more positive attitude towards homework.
Fehm & Mrose., (2008), UK	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (survey research)	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	7 sessions	Client's attitude towards homework: The patients generally had a positive attitude towards homework and that they accomplished most of the tasks; The vast majority of patients view homework positively, and they are clearly aware of the beneficial function of IA.
Foo & Kazantzis., (2007), UK	Empirical study	Case study	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	13 sessions	Some of Chinese culturally specific beliefs can influence the process of integrating IA into the course of therapy. Homework adherence in the Chinese culture and they found that IA could provide culturally specific benefits. A number of strategies for the use of IA with Chinese clients.
Ingram & Salzberg., (1990), UK	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (between-subjects design)	Behavioral therapy (BT)	8 sessions Six assertive techniques and a seventh “Soft Assertion” technique involving expression of positive feelings	The effects of homework in behavioral therapy on substance abuse populations. Homework compliance was not clearly or consistently related to outcome.
Jensen et al., (2020), USA	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (pre-experimental design)	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	Participants completed an average of just over 20 sessions of treatment.	Definition and terminology of IA. The importance of IA in therapy. The congruence between IA content and takeaways was statistically significantly associated with homework compliance.
Kazantzis & Shinkfeld., (2007), USA	Technique paper	Case Study	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)		Much of the research into homework focuses on the role of the client in its successful completion. Environmental, patient, task, and therapist factors can serve as barriers to homework completion.
Kazantzis & Deane., (1999), USA	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (survey research)			Only 25% of all psychologists reported using systematic procedures for recommending homework.

			Psychologists' use of homework procedures CBT practitioners used procedures for the systematic recommendation of homework more often than non-CBT practitioners did.
Kazantzis & L'Abate., (2010), USA	Book chapter	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	The meaning of completing the assignment for patients: a successful achievement of previous IA as well as receiving feedback and encouragement from the therapist, may both enhance self-efficacy and strengthen adaptive, health-related behaviors on the part of the patient.
Kazantzis & Lampropoulos., (2002), USA	Literature review	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	There is sufficient evidence to support the assertion that IA enhances psychotherapy outcomes. Homework compliance is a consistently significant predictor of treatment outcome.
Kazantzis et al., (2000), USA	Meta-analysis	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	Terms and definitions of IA Specific forms of IA tasks IA has a positive impact on therapy The factors influencing IA adherence and completion in psychotherapy
Kazantzis et al., (2005), NZ	Book chapter		Terms and definitions of IA The meaning of homework
Kazantzis et al., (2005), USA	Survey research	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	Terms and definitions of IA Therapists have a positive attitude towards the role of homework in therapy. Different attitudes of different theoretical orientations: more positive attitudes were reported among those with a cognitive behavioral theoretical orientation. Nevertheless, the use of IA among psychodynamic/analytic practitioners reported in the present sample was unexpected.
Kazantzis et al., (2010), UK	Conference discussion paper	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	Terms and definitions of IA Importance of IA in therapy IA can improve treatment outcomes Factors affecting homework adherence
Kazantzis et al., (2010), USA	Meta-analysis	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	Expanded on a 2000 meta-analysis (adding more controlled experiments) and the findings supported the

					conclusion that homework improves treatment outcomes.
Kazantzis et al., (2016), USA	Meta-analysis		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)		Terms and definitions of IA Homework compliance has been directly associated with treatment outcomes
Kazantzis et al., (2017), USA	Systematic review		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)		Significant attention has been directed toward adherence with CBT homework for anxiety and depressive disorders, and adherence assessment methods have diversified.
Kobori et al., (2020), UK	Brief report		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	2 sessions	The importance of IA IA can help reduce depressive symptoms. Whether perfectionists procrastinate IA.
Kraepelien et al., (2021), USA	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (RCT)	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	8 weeks	Homework can help clients reduce insomnia Homework quality seem important for outcome.
Mausbach et al., (2010)	Meta-analysis		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)		A significant relationship between homework compliance and treatment outcome suggesting a small to medium effect. Compliance with homework is an important component of psychotherapy regardless of the target symptoms.
Ryum et al., (2022), USA	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (Post-event design)	Cognitive therapy (CT)	40 sessions	Therapist competence in assigning homework was a strong predictor of treatment outcomes in cognitive therapy.
Siqueland et al., (2004), USA	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (between-subjects design)	Cognitive therapy (CT)	A 6-month active phase and a 3-month booster phase. (Including individual treatment and Group Drug Counseling)	Client ratings of homework's helpfulness have been correlated with treatment attendance in cocaine dependence treatment → attendance and client opinions on homework are related but distinct.
Tang & Kreindler., (2017), USA	Literature review		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)		The degree to which homework matches the content of the therapy sessions affects homework completion. The optimal use of mobile phone with app capabilities (smartphone) can maximize CBT homework compliance in therapy congruency, fostering learning, guiding therapy, connection building, emphasizing on completion and population specificity.
Tompkins, M. A., (2002), USA	Technique paper		Cognitive therapy (CT)		The importance of IA Factors influencing IA adherence.

					How to improve homework compliance. Homework adherence is often lower than expected or desired.
Weck et al., (2013), UK	Empirical study	Quantitative Studies (Post-event design)	Maintenance Cognitive therapy (MCT) with that of manualized active psychoeducation (MAPE).	The MCT treatment included 16 individual 1-hour sessions within 8 months (4 weekly, 10 every 2 weeks, and 2 monthly sessions).	Specific therapeutic competence (i.e., competence in reviewing homework) is associated with patient compliance with homework, The therapeutic alliance and number of previous depressive episodes were not associated with homework compliance. Homework compliance was not related to treatment outcome.
Wells, A. (2000), UK	Book chapter		Cognitive therapy (CT)		Well's meta-cognitive theory can provide insights for IA.
Wheaton, M. G., (2021), USA	Literature review		Cognitive Behavioral therapy (CBT) Exposure and Response prevention (ERP)		Homework completion is an important component of treating OCD with ERP.

Discussion

This section critically discusses key findings on inter-sessional activities (IA) from coaching, counselling and therapy literature, emphasising implications for coaching and human resource development (HRD) contexts. It focuses on coaching approaches, contracting, relationships and lessons transferable from parallel fields.

Key Findings from the Review

The literature on inter-sessional activities (IA) across coaching, counselling, and therapy reveals distinct trends and critical gaps. In coaching, IA is predominantly applied within cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC) to evaluate thought patterns and support emotional regulation, reflecting its therapeutic use (Passmore and Sinclair, 2021; Willson, 2020). However, research on IA in coaching remains limited and largely descriptive. Recent findings suggest IA may be more prevalent than previously

recognised, with client perceptions shaped by the coach's approach and the degree of client responsibility (Passmore et al., 2023).

Conversely, counselling and therapy possess a more extensive evidence base, consistently demonstrating a positive link between IA completion and improved outcomes (Al-Kubaisy et al., 1992; Bryant, 1999; Burns, 2000; Decker, 2016; Kraepelien, 2021). Nevertheless, IA definitions and terminology vary widely, reflecting conceptual inconsistency (Kazantzis, 2010). Technological integration, particularly smartphone use, has enhanced adherence to IA, especially in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) homework (Tang and Kreindler, 2017). It provides insights that smartphone technologies and AI can be deployed to enhance IA compliance in coaching by providing 24/7 reinforcement, just-in-time prompts, automated tracking of goal-related behaviors, and personalized conversational support to overcome motivational barriers between sessions.

Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and meta-analyses reinforce IA's efficacy, showing a positive correlation between homework compliance and treatment success (Blanchard et al., 1991a, 1991b; Carroll et al., 2005; Kazantzis et al., 2000, 2010, 2016; Mausbach et al., 2010). IA tasks typically involve cognitive and emotional regulation, behavioural monitoring, and observational learning (Fehm, 2004; Kazantzis, 2006).

Practitioner attitudes toward IA vary by therapeutic orientation; CBT therapists generally endorse IA more than psychodynamic practitioners (Fehm and Kazantzis, 2004; Kazantzis et al., 2005). Clients in counselling often perceive IA positively and acknowledge its benefits (Fehm, 2008), whereas coaching clients may experience discomfort due to terminology and perceived power imbalances within the coaching relationship (Passmore et al., 2023).

Adherence to IA is essential for positive outcomes but is frequently suboptimal, hindered by unrealistic goals, insufficient reinforcement and limited client motivation (Shelton and Levy, 1981; Persons, 1989; Detweiler and Whisman, 1999). Enhancing adherence involves aligning assignments with client values, therapist competence,

client readiness and a strong therapeutic alliance (Dobson, 2021; Tang and Kreindler, 2017). Specific strategies for Chinese clients emphasise early introduction, achievable tasks and clear communication (Foo and Kazantzis, 2007).

Inter-sessional Activities (IA) significantly drive positive outcomes, especially in cognitive-behavioural approaches, by directly linking to two theoretical frameworks. First, the use of IA for evaluating thought patterns and emotional regulation aligns with the cognitive-behavioural model, reflecting the strong endorsement from CBT practitioners (Fehm and Kazantzis, 2004). Second, the independent work of IA fulfils the action and experimentation phase of Experiential Learning (Pedler et al., 2005). The costly, spaced-out structure of coaching relies on IAs to ensure clients apply session insights in the real world, with subsequent sessions providing the essential reflection and conceptualization needed to transform practice into generalised, embedded knowledge, thereby completing the learning cycle. However, assumptions that important work occurs solely within sessions restrict wider IA adoption. There remains a notable research gap in coaching, underscoring the need for empirical studies to evaluate IA effectiveness and optimise client engagement and adherence in these fields.

The temporal aspect of coaching and its effects on IA

The core temporal distinction between counselling/therapy and coaching significantly impacts the use of inter-sessional activities (IA). Counselling is generally retrospective and long-term, addressing underlying emotional issues, while coaching is future-focused, goal-oriented, and often short-term (Passmore, 2021; Grant, 2001). The premium cost of external coaching drives a structure with fewer, more spaced-out 1:1 sessions over a fixed period, such as six to nine months. This necessity for cost control extends the inter-session gap (e.g., 3-4 weeks) compared to the weekly counselling cadence (ICF Research Portal, 2023). This wider window is deliberately used to facilitate the real-world application of complex IA, which are crucial for skill generalisation and achieving measurable outcomes (Passmore et al., 2023). Consequently, the process shifts the burden of development primarily onto the

coachee's effort between sessions, maximising the value of the limited, costly face-to-face time.

Practical implications for coaching and counselling

Our experience, supported by the evidence from this and previous studies (Passmore, Day & Qing, 2023) suggests that inter-sessional activities (IA) are less commonly used in coaching than in some other behavioural change disciplines, despite their significant potential when implemented collaboratively. In drawing on the insights from this work we believe in the short-term coaches and councillors should make greater use of IA and do so through adapting the following practices. First, co-designing IA with clients thereby enhancing autonomy, agency and engagement, as opposed to prescribing tasks unilaterally. When clients perceive ownership of the activity, the evidence suggests they are more likely to find it meaningful and follow through between sessions. Second, the integration of IA should be grounded in a strong working alliance. Research in counselling indicates that the effectiveness of IA depends heavily on the quality of the practitioner–client relationship. Practitioners thus are best focusing on establishing a trust and mutual understanding first, before introducing between-session activities. Third, the perceived relevance of IA is crucial. Given that activities aligned with the client's goals, values, and motivations are more likely to be completed than those that simply extend session content, practitioners should frame IA explicitly within the client's broader developmental aims. Fourthly, consistent follow-up enhances impact. Practitioners should capture the clients proposed actions and then review these action plans in subsequent sessions. This both gently holds the client to account and demonstrates both mindful of the work being undertaken by the client between meetings and a commitment to support the client.

In the medium term we believe the research has also implications for professional bodies, training providers and buyers. Both coaching and many counselling competencies have traditionally been silent on the potential of IA. This research suggests IA should be explicitly incorporated into competency frameworks, alongside

skills such as questioning, listening and empathising, as a distinct skill which can improve outcomes.

Thirdly, for those providing training, we believe IA should be specific aspect covered in training, with learners encouraged to co-create activities with clients based on the principles outlined above, as an evidenced based intervention to support the activities in the session.

Finally, for organisations responsible for buying, monitoring and evaluating coaching programmes, we would advocate that attention is paid to how providers are leveraging IA, whether coaches in their pool are actively encouraged to agreed IA, and secondly how the organisation can support client engagement with IA through its internal communications.

Limitations and future directions

While this review offers a unique contribution to coaching by examining inter-session activities (IA), several limitations must be acknowledged. First, inconsistent terminology posed challenges in scope. Although multiple terms were searched, relevant studies using alternative conceptual labels may have been inadvertently excluded. Second, the review focused on literature published between 1995 and 2023. Although few coaching studies exist before 1995, this cut-off may have excluded earlier references to IA in counselling and therapy, potentially missed in backward and forward citation searches. Third, methodological variability across included studies limited the review's rigour. Much of the coaching literature on IA is based on practitioner narratives, theoretical discussion or qualitative research, with limited empirical data. Unlike other systematic reviews in coaching (e.g., Passmore *et al*., 2025a; Passmore *et al*., 2025b), a Risk of Bias (ROB) assessment (Whiting *et al*., 2016) was not feasible due to the mixed-methods nature of the data. This heterogeneity reduces the capacity to make definitive claims about efficacy or cross-domain applicability. Finally, the review does not systematically account for cultural, contextual or relational factors that may mediate IA effectiveness. Although the review included the country of origin of the papers, we did

not perform a comparative analysis of country differences due to the limitation of the studies. We acknowledge the issue of underrepresentation of non-English contributions in this field. Given that IA practices are often co-constructed within coach-client dynamics, the country/cultural difference remains an important area for future investigation.

This review underscores the promising role of IA in coaching, given its contribution to counselling, while noting the limited empirical research available. First, there is a pressing need for rigorous empirical studies to evaluate the effectiveness of various inter-sessional tasks in coaching contexts. Specifically, what additional contribution does IA make to coaching outcomes. Although counselling and therapy have begun to clarify mechanisms of change related to homework assignments (Kazantzis et al., 2010), coaching research remains comparatively underdeveloped. Future studies should examine which types of tasks produce the most significant outcomes, for whom, and under what circumstances. Second, more attention should be given to clients' experiences with IA in coaching. How can activities be created to optimise coaching engagement? What role can technology such as Acritical Intelligence play in acting to nudge clients towards intersessional task engagement and in greater reflection? This may involve the creation of hybrid coaching, blending human and AI interventions to optimise the support for learning and behavioural change. Investigating these perspectives could shed light on motivation, adherence, and the co-construction of learning between sessions. Finally, longitudinal and mixed-methods research is needed to explore the sustained impact of IA on goal attainment and identity development. These approaches could strengthen the theoretical foundation and provide practical guidance for integrating structured tasks into long-term coaching practice.

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