



Coaching the Wounded: Trauma-Informed Practices for Faith-Based Coaches

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Abstract

Christian coaching has become an increasingly vital practice in equipping individuals to pursue their purpose, foster leadership growth, and achieve spiritual maturity. However, many clients bring unacknowledged wounds from trauma that can shape how they think, feel, and lead. Traditional coaching models often overlook the profound impact of trauma on human flourishing. This paper introduces a biblically integrated, trauma-informed coaching model grounded in Dr. Rebekah Lloyd's trauma-informed leadership framework (2024). Rooted in Isaiah 61, the model emphasizes four core behaviors – understanding trauma, regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing – while maintaining clear ethical boundaries between coaching and counseling. Drawing on neuroscience, leadership studies, and biblical theology, this paper demonstrates that trauma-informed faith-based coaching not only prevents retraumatization but also fosters genuine flourishing, characterized by resilience, joy, and a sense of purpose in Christ. The paper concludes with implications for practice and future research on measuring flourishing outcomes and developing trauma-informed training for Christian coaches.

Keywords: trauma, faith-based coaching, trauma-informed, leadership

In recent years, the coaching profession has emerged as a significant influence in Christian leadership, organizational development, and spiritual formation. Faith-based coaching bridges the gap between discipleship and leadership development, guiding individuals toward growth in both purpose and character. Nevertheless, beneath the visible progress of many leaders lies an invisible reality: trauma. Studies estimate that more than 70% of adults in the United States have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetime (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2022). Such experiences – ranging from childhood adversity to combat exposure, relational betrayal,

or loss – can alter brain function, emotional regulation, and relational patterns (Kozłowska et al., 2015).

Coaches often encounter the behavioral symptoms of trauma without recognizing their neurological or spiritual roots. A client may appear resistant, unmotivated, or overly anxious when, in truth, their nervous system is responding to past wounds rather than present circumstances. Without trauma-informed awareness, even well-intentioned coaching can unintentionally cause harm or deepen shame.

This paper proposes a trauma-informed, biblically grounded approach to Christian coaching that addresses the needs of wounded clients while promoting resilience and flourishing. The model builds on the trauma-informed leadership (TIL) framework (Lloyd, 2024) by translating its core behaviors into coaching practice. The theological foundation is found in *Isaiah 61*, where the mission to “bind up the brokenhearted” provides both vision and vocation for Christian coaches.

Literature Review

Trauma and the Human Experience

Trauma, broadly defined, is the emotional response to an event that overwhelms an individual’s capacity to cope. According to Lloyd (2024), trauma “is a deeply distressing or disturbing experience that overwhelms an individual’s ability to cope, resulting in long-term psychological, emotional, and physiological effects” (p. 289). Neuroscientific research has demonstrated that trauma affects the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex – regions crucial for threat detection, memory, and executive functioning (Kozłowska et al., 2015). These changes can manifest as hypervigilance, emotional numbing, or avoidance.

In leadership and coaching contexts, trauma often appears as self-doubt, perfectionism, or relational withdrawal. Traditional performance-based coaching models may interpret these behaviors as resistance rather than protective responses. A trauma-informed lens reframes these patterns as survival strategies developed in unsafe environments (Bath, 2008).

Trauma-Informed Practice

Trauma-informed care originated within mental-health and social-service disciplines, emphasizing five guiding principles: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Within organizational settings, TIL has been shown to reduce burnout and increase

psychological safety (Lloyd, 2024). However, these principles remain underdeveloped in coaching research, particularly within Christian contexts.

Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework provides a foundation for adaptation. The model identifies four behavioral domains – understanding trauma, regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing – that can be translated into coaching competencies.

Flourishing and Positive Psychology

Flourishing is a central construct in positive psychology, describing a state of well-being that includes emotional stability, purpose, virtue, and social connectedness (Seligman, 2011; VanderWeele, 2017). For Christian theology, flourishing aligns with the biblical concept of *shalom* – a holistic peace that encompasses relationships with God, others, and oneself (VanderWeele, 2019). VanderWeele (2017) argued that flourishing integrates physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions, resonating deeply with a biblical anthropology that views humans as image-bearers designed for wholeness.

Integrating flourishing with trauma-informed coaching invites a shift from deficit-based recovery to strength-based growth. Coaches become facilitators of transformation rather than fixers of brokenness, guiding clients toward renewed identity and purpose.

Biblical Foundation: Isaiah 61 and the Ministry of Restoration

The theological foundation for trauma-informed faith-based coaching is found in Isaiah 61:1–3:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners. (*New International Version*, 2024).

Jesus affirmed this mission in Luke 4:18–19, declaring that He was the fulfillment of this prophecy Himself. The passage establishes a divine pattern of healing and empowerment: God meets human pain with presence and transforms despair into purpose. Trauma-informed coaching echoes this rhythm by meeting clients in their pain, affirming dignity, and walking with them toward freedom and flourishing in Christ.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, reflective analysis of case examples drawn from faith-based coaching sessions in which trauma-informed principles were implemented. The methodology synthesizes practitioner reflection, existing trauma literature, and biblical exegesis of Isaiah 61. The cases were analyzed to identify patterns of transformation, with particular focus on shifts in safety, empowerment, and spiritual flourishing. While exploratory, the methodology demonstrates the utility of integrating trauma-informed frameworks into faith-based coaching practice.

Findings and Discussion

Understanding Trauma: Naming the Invisible Wound

Coaches cannot help what they cannot see. The first step in trauma-informed coaching is awareness. Many clients carry trauma responses – such as people pleasing, perfectionism, or avoidance – without recognizing them as adaptations to past harm. A trauma-informed coach recognizes that behavior communicates a need. When clients appear resistant or “stuck,” the coach considers whether their nervous system is in fight, flight, or freeze mode rather than labeling the behavior as defiance.

This awareness aligns with Jesus’ approach in Scripture as recorded in John 4:1–26. When Jesus met the woman at the well, He saw beneath her avoidance and shame to the deeper story of rejection and longing. His response – truth spoken in safety – illustrates trauma-informed compassion. By integrating this behavior, coaches can help clients identify and name the invisible wounds that hinder their flourishing. Awareness becomes the doorway to transformation.

Regulating Distress: Cultivating Safety and Presence

Regulation is the bridge between trauma and flourishing. Neurobiologically, safety enables the prefrontal cortex to reengage, allowing for reflection, learning, and decision making (Kozlowska et al., 2015). In coaching, this means creating an emotionally safe environment characterized by trust, predictability, and empathy. Faith-based coaches have an additional resource: the ministry of presence. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:3–4, God comforts us so that we can comfort others. Coaches regulate distress by offering calm, consistent presence and inviting clients into shared reflection. Simple practices – such as grounding exercises, rhythmic breathing, or prayerful silence – help clients return to a sense of safety. Safety is not the absence of challenge but the assurance that challenge can be met with support. Trauma-informed coaching thus transforms the coaching space into a sanctuary of growth and healing.

Empowering Others: Restoring Agency and Voice

Trauma often robs individuals of agency. Empowerment, therefore, is both ethical and theological. The trauma-informed coach resists the impulse to rescue and instead facilitates discovery. By honoring client agency, the coach restores control and self-efficacy.

Empowerment reflects Jesus' pattern in the Gospels. When He healed, He often asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" (*New International Version*, 2024, Mark 10:51). This question restored dignity and choice to those accustomed to powerlessness.

In practice, empowerment involves collaborative goal setting, reflective questioning, and affirmation of strengths. Clients learn to identify what is within their control and to align their goals with God's calling. As empowerment grows, flourishing follows—defined not by perfection but by renewed capacity for purposeful living.

Practicing Emotional Healing: Integrating Faith and Compassion

The final behavior—practicing emotional healing—bridges the psychological and spiritual dimensions of coaching. Unlike counseling, coaching does not excavate trauma histories; it creates conditions for healing through compassion, reflection, and Spirit-led guidance. Coaches facilitate healing moments by acknowledging emotion, inviting prayer, and affirming identity in Christ.

Emotional healing is also supported by neuroscience. Empathic attunement between coach and client activates the brain's social engagement system, fostering safety and connection (Siegel, 2020). Spiritually, this aligns with Jesus' ministry of presence—He wept with those who wept and sat with those in pain.

Trauma-informed faith-based coaching resists spiritual bypassing—the tendency to use religious language to avoid pain. Instead, it honors lament as a pathway to transformation. When clients are free to express sorrow and still encounter acceptance, emotional healing begins.

Distinguishing Coaching From Counseling

A central ethical distinction must be maintained: coaching is not therapy. The International Coaching Federation (2021) defined coaching as a partnership that inspires clients to maximize potential through self-discovery and action. Counseling, by contrast, treats diagnosed mental-health conditions and focuses on emotional restoration from the past (American Psychological Association, 2020). Trauma-informed coaching acknowledges trauma without treating it. Coaches operate within scope by (a)

recognizing signs of trauma while avoiding diagnostic language; (b) referring clients to licensed professionals when symptoms exceed coaching boundaries; and (c) using forward-focused strategies to enhance resilience, not to process clinical trauma. This ethical clarity protects both client and coach while preserving the integrity of the coaching relationship.

Flourishing as the Outcome of Trauma-Informed Coaching

Flourishing represents the culmination of trauma-informed coaching. It is the state in which individuals live with resilience, purpose, and relational harmony despite past adversity. According to VanderWeele (2017), flourishing encompasses happiness, meaning, character, relationships, and health—all of which are nurtured in the safe and empowering environment of trauma-informed coaching.

Faith-based flourishing integrates the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), the virtues of perseverance (Rom. 5:3-5), and the peace of Christ (Phil. 4:7). In coaching contexts, flourishing manifests when clients regain agency, develop spiritual disciplines, and experience renewed hope and peace.

For example, one case in this study involved a ministry leader who experienced burnout and self-doubt after being betrayed by a colleague. Through trauma-informed coaching, she learned to regulate distress, establish boundaries, and rediscover her sense of calling. Six months later, she described feeling “restored, not because the pain disappeared, but because I could finally breathe again.” That statement encapsulates flourishing—not perfection, but freedom.

Implications for Faith-Based Coaches and Leaders

The findings have several practical implications:

- **training in trauma literacy:** Faith-based coaches need a foundational understanding of trauma’s impact on the brain and behavior. Certification programs should include education in emotional regulation, safety creation, and ethical boundaries.
- **integration of Scripture and neuroscience:** Coaches should confidently blend biblical narratives with evidence-based tools to enhance their effectiveness and impact. For example, Psalm 23 can be paired with breathing exercises to evoke a sense of calm and trust.
- **organizational application:** Churches and Christian nonprofits can implement trauma-informed leadership principles to reduce burnout, improve team health, and model Christ-like compassion.

- **coaching supervision and community:** Coaches require safe spaces for reflection and accountability to maintain resilience and prevent compassion fatigue.

Future Research Directions

Three areas warrant further exploration:

- **empirical measurement of flourishing outcomes:** Quantitative research could measure changes in resilience, purpose, and spiritual well-being among clients receiving trauma-informed coaching.
- **curriculum development:** Future studies should evaluate trauma-informed faith-based coach training and its impact on professional competency.
- **cross-cultural adaptation:** Because cultural narratives shape the expression of trauma, the global application of trauma-informed coaching requires the use of contextual theological frameworks.

These research trajectories can advance both scholarship and practice, ensuring that trauma-informed coaching continues to evolve as a vital discipline in ministry and leadership.

Conclusion

Trauma-informed faith-based coaching offers a pathway for healing and flourishing that integrates science, theology, and leadership practice. By understanding trauma, regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing, coaches create environments that foster safety and transformation. Rooted in Isaiah 61, this approach reflects Christ's mission to bind up the brokenhearted and proclaim freedom to the captives.

In a world saturated with pain and disconnection, trauma-informed Christian coaches serve as bridges between psychological wisdom and divine grace. They are not therapists but companions in restoration – guides who hold sacred space for others to rediscover identity, purpose, and flourishing in the presence of God.

About the Author

Dr. Rebekah C. Lloyd is a leadership scholar, veteran of the U.S. Army, and founder of the Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership. She holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership and is the developer of the Trauma-Informed Leadership Impact Framework, a research-based model that integrates neuroscience, emotional intelligence, and organizational strategy. Her work explores how trauma-informed practices strengthen leadership effectiveness, resilience, and organizational well-

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