



Glenn Livingston, Ph.D.

The “Right” Way to End a Coaching Session

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Sharon Livingston, Ph.D.



Glenn and Sharon Livingston have sold over \$30,000,000 in consulting and/or coaching services. Glenn has worked with over 1,000 coaching clients and directly supervised many coaches and psychotherapists. *(And Sharon has worked with over 65,000 people in a group format!)* The Livingston's previous work and theories have also appeared in dozens of major media like those listed here. And Glenn was raised in a family of over a dozen helping professionals (*psychologists, social workers, counselors, therapists, etc*)... it's in his blood!



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BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Glenn: Hello, darling.

Sharon: I don't know why you're saying hello when we've been together all night.

Glenn: We've been together all night, that's true.

Sharon: It's almost the end of our date.

Glenn: That's true. It's almost the end of our date.

Sharon: I'm getting a little bit nervous because it's almost the end of the date. I don't want it to end.

Glenn: That's very much how people may feel towards the end of a coaching session, right?

Sharon: It's almost always the way they feel at the end of a coaching session.

Glenn: With the exception being that coaching sessions are supposed to end, and dates could, depending upon the relationship and how long you've been seeing each other and --

Sharon: Wait, now, we can't talk about this anymore.

Glenn: No, we can. Because I think it's an important distinction and I think, is relevant to how to end a session, which is what the topic is about today, right?

Sharon: Right. A date may be at the beginning of something else.

Glenn: Right. Dates can be open-ended. Coaching sessions are supposed to follow a structure so that people can have a contained set of feelings inside of little laboratory and work on a very specific problem intensely for a very short period of time.

Sharon: Yes.

Glenn: I have a lot of thoughts about -- people have been asking, "Well, how do you --"

Sharon: How do you end a session?

[0:00:57.8]

Glenn: Yeah. I have a lot of thoughts about it. I think that the experience of talking about this might sound like a set of contradictory advice, thoughts and feelings. But, if you follow it closely, you'll see there's a set of principles underneath that will help people to make the right decision with the right client.

Sharon: Yes. I'm very anxious to hear what you have to say about it because I have a lot of thoughts about it, too. Good.

Glenn: Well, you go first. What are your thoughts?

Sharon: Well, here's why it's hard for me. I know that the hottest stuff comes up in the last five minutes. Then, you had to figure out, "Well, when is the last five minutes?" Because, sometimes, it feels like the last five minutes are happening as the last five minutes are ending. Do you know what I mean?

Glenn: Let's just talk structurally for a minute, first, and what the purpose is of having a structure.

Sharon: Sure. Spoken like a true J.

Glenn: Well, yeah. I mean, I am an INTJ. This just has to do with systems. But there are times when you want structure. If you had a brain surgeon or a heart surgeon, you want them to have a structure for the operation. You want them to have a set of checklist. You want them to have a hygienic laboratory that they do the operation in. You want them to have procedures and rules in place so that the operation gets done successfully, right?

Sharon: Yes.

Glenn: I think that, to a certain extent, that coaching is kind of like an operation. Now, it's not psychotherapy. We're not dealing with mental illness. We're dealing with the worried well as opposed to the mentally ill. It's not quite as serious. But, nevertheless, the structure of having a discrete period of time where you're going to focus forces the full set of feelings surrounding the problem that you're working on, the goal you're trying to achieve, it forces it into language, it forces it into the room. When you deviate from that structure, you're allowing some of the intensity to leak out. You're setting up a situation where the feelings, insights, ideas, difficult emotions, obstacles and conflicts where they can start to be acted out as opposed to articulated and solved. There really is a purpose. There really, really is a purpose to having a structure. But by the same token, you don't want to have a bell that goes off at the 45-minute or an egg timer that's says, "Okay, time's up. We'll have to talk about that next week."

[0:03:01.8]

Sharon: Right.

Glenn: You know, that can be kind of rude, disengaging, abrupt, and that can be traumatizing to a client as well, right?

Sharon: Oh, yeah.

Glenn: I would probably say that if you have to err in one direction, err in being over-giving as opposed to over-depriving.

Sharon: Right.

Glenn: You should be aware of that. When you begin a session, there is anticipation, excitement, anxiety, disappointment, everything, in that initial moment when you're beginning the session. Similarly, the process of disengaging also engenders anxiety, excitement, fear --

Sharon: Feelings of abandonment.

Glenn: -- feelings of abandonment. At the same time, there are feelings of excitement about, "Well, what did I learn? How did this experience change me?" "Now, can I go and try them in the world?"

Sharon: "How am I going to apply it?" Right, yeah.

Glenn: Here's the rub. As the coach, you need to develop an ultra sensitivity to what your client really needs to move forward in the world. Sometimes, they need just a little bit extra. Sometimes, they need just a little bit of extra time. They need to know that you went the extra mile for them. That there's someone in the world who's giving them just a little bit more than they deserve. I think that's perfectly fine.

Sharon: Maybe not deserve, but, a little bit more than they expected.

Glenn: Well, yeah. I think to the extent that coaching is a professional agreement, and you get paid for the time. When you get more time than you paid for then you got a little bit more than you bargained for, right?

Sharon: Right. I always take issue with the word "deserve" because it's just a personal peeve of mine. I think that we all deserve and nobody deserves.

Glenn: That's true. The first takeaway is that there is no one way to end a session. It's very dependent upon the individual client and the relationship. But, sessions do have to come to an end. There's that paradox. There's no one

[0:04:37.7]

way to do it, but sessions really do have to come to an end. The more regular you are, the more successful you probably will be with your practice because it's very difficult. I mean, it's kind of easy when you have one or two clients to have a 45-

minute session go to be an hour and 15. When you have 20 clients or 40 clients, it's impossible.

Sharon: Right.

Glenn: It's not impractical, it's impossible to successfully manage your day, and be present for that many clients without having a break in-between as scheduled so that you can recoup and recover and let those feelings flow through you.

Sharon: Right, that makes total sense.

Glenn: Okay. That was my first primary thought about how to end a session.

Sharon: I mean, one thing also is that you have to establish what the timing is for the session because you have another one after it. You want your clients to know what to expect so that they won't feel abandoned. It's just a fact. The session goes from this time to this time, maybe there's a few minutes leeway.

Glenn: This is your time, I reserved it for you.

Sharon: Yeah.

Glenn: This is your time. I guess what we're talking about that, some coaches get into a thing where they try to schedule sessions every 45 minutes with no time whatsoever in between.

Sharon: That's nuts. Yeah, that's really bad.

Glenn: That's pretty kooky. You don't have any time to detox. You don't have any time to get a drink of water. You don't have any time to go to the bathroom.

Sharon: Take a breath.

Glenn: Yeah. Then, I thought, we could talk about the situations where it becomes difficult to end the session or it feels very awkward. Many coaches feel it's impossible to end the session in an effective, genuine way. I was wondering, did you have a situation or two you could talk through to illustrate and help people to understand what those were about?

[0:06:09.1]

Sharon: I had found that it's typical that, at the end of the session, something hot comes up. It doesn't matter who it is or what it is, something hot comes up.

Glenn: Why? Why do you think that is?

Sharon: Well, I think the person is beginning to get scared of disengaging. I think that I'm seen as a warm, caring person. They don't want to give up on that. I think I have a part in it also -- you know this about me. I've told you this a million times. I have to force myself to be the one to get off the phone first, always, right? I have to force myself to do that to have some boundaries. Otherwise, I end up getting my feelings hurt because somebody's always hanging up on me.

Glenn: You will always stay on the phone as long as whoever you're talking to --

Sharon: You need me. I'm here.

Glenn: You love to be needed.

Sharon: I do. I love to give. But, it's also a bit of a character flaw, on my part, because it doesn't give any push. Do you know what I mean?

Glenn: It makes you a very sweet person.

Sharon: I know it's sweet, but --

Glenn: Well, it's part of the reason that you can be a phenomenal coach. People really bond to you.

Sharon: Right. But also, it makes it a little bit harder for them to separate. I'm not doing them a service if I don't help them separate, go off in the world, and, you know, be whole.

Glenn: The other thing that happens is they fall in love with you just a little too much. It's really okay. In my world view, it's necessary that clients both love and hate their coaches and that coaches both love and hate their clients. It doesn't mean you act out on it.

Sharon: Well, of course.

Glenn: But what happens if you give too much is that you're going to miss the second half of the experience. The second half of the experience is how do they deal with the frustration and anger that's stops them in the world.

[0:07:43.9]

See, if all you do is give to them when you give them more than they really expect all time, and its way more, then it won't be possible for them to feel the frustration with you. If that frustration doesn't come into the room, you're going to miss an opportunity to heal that frustration en vivo, so that they can solve the problem that they're working on.

Sharon: That makes total sense. Sure.

Glenn: Right.

Sharon: I mean, I understand that intellectually.

Glenn: Kind of sucks when you have to --

Sharon: It's a struggle. It really is. Because, I love them all.

Glenn: No coach really wants their client to feel frustrated with them.

Sharon: Exactly.

Glenn: It's a very bizarre insight when you realize that to help clients really achieve their goal and keep them for the long run, you have to allow them to have a balanced set of feelings for you. They can't just love you. As good as it feels and as much as they want to, if you just set it up so they love you, then, they don't make the progress that you want them to make.

Sharon: Right, that they've asked you to help them with.

Glenn: Right.

Sharon: Oh, by the way. I forgot to tell you. This afternoon -- oh, I don't know how I forgot about it, but -- I mean, it's so relevant to what we've been talking about this whole session. But this guy came up to me, and he asked me to run a workshop. It's a really good opportunity for me. I have to tell him by Monday.

Glenn: What was his name?

Sharon: George.

Glenn: Did something really happen there or are you role playing?

Sharon: I'm role playing.

[0:08:57.4]

Glenn: Okay. You're role playing. What would happen??

Sharon: You believed me? You asked me for a situation so I was --

Glenn: Yeah.

Sharon: -- acting out.

Glenn: You got to tell him by Monday. What do we need to figure out before then?

Sharon: I don't know what to do.

Glenn: Could you write to me about it? Maybe put your pros and cons on a piece of paper, write to me about it, send me an email, and I'll write you back. Or do you want to set up another quarter of a session for tomorrow some time?

Sharon: I think we should do a quarter of a session. I think I have to talk it through.

Glenn: Okay. Do you want a quarter of a session or would you rather have a half a session? Do you want a whole session? It's up to you. I can probably work it out tomorrow.

Sharon: Okay, sure.

Glenn: Sure, what?

Sharon: Sure. Let's do a session tomorrow because this is really important.

Glenn: Okay. What's your schedule like tomorrow evening? I can probably free up something around 7:30.

Sharon: My husband's coming back from Tokyo. I really have to prepare for him because he's going to be exhausted and -- oh by the way, do you remember I was telling you about his trip?

Glenn: What time is your husband coming back?

Sharon: At 6:00.

Glenn: He's coming back at 6:00?

Sharon: Uh-huh.

[0:09:54.9]

Glenn: I want to help you. It sounds really constructive, what you're trying to work out, but I'm not sure I can schedule something before 6:00. We can maybe do 7:15.

Sharon: I really can't.

Glenn: Okay. What about Monday morning? Maybe I can do 15 minutes before I start at 7:45.

Sharon: I guess I could do that.

Glenn: Why don't we do that? I can ask the 8:00 person to move back for about five minutes, give a little extra time.

Sharon: Okay.

Glenn: Maybe you can be thinking about it between now and Monday morning. We'll talk about it then.

Sharon: Okay.

Glenn: Here's what's going to happen. I can tell you 100% what's going to happen in that situation. You would have gone out and thought about it. By the time Monday morning came, you would call me and tell me that, "You know, it seemed like such an emergency when I was talking to you. But as I thought it through, I figured out what to do. What I'm going to do is blank." We would have talked about it a little bit. You would have been fine.

Sharon: With a quarter of a session?

Glenn: You would have been fine, yeah. Because what you needed was to know that you weren't being totally abandoned, that you had my company to make the decision. But, you also needed to understand that we live in a world of adults and reality. Not that I would say that you directly kind of communicated it through the scheduling. I would say 9 times out of 10, when clients would do that with me, by the time that they actually have the emergency session, it wasn't really an emergency anymore.

Sharon: Right. Let's go role play another one.

Glenn: Okay. Go ahead.

Sharon: That was good. Thank you.

[0:11:05.5]

Glenn: Sure.

Sharon: I'm so glad we got to talk today.

Glenn: You did a really good job. You told me what was on your mind, you laughed, you cried, and you --

Sharon: [crying]

Glenn: Yeah, you did a really good job. You had all of your feelings today --

Sharon: [crying] [inaudible] [0:11:23.4]

Glenn: Could you try to articulate? I don't quite understand what you're saying.

Sharon: [crying] [inaudible] [0:11:34.3]

Glenn: Well, what is it that's making you cry?

Sharon: [laughing] But, it's not funny.

Glenn: Have another minute or two. We have another minute or two.

Sharon: I can't do it. I just can't do it.

Glenn: What is it that you can't do?

Sharon: I don't feel strong enough. I just can't. I can't do it.

Glenn: That's a normal feeling. It's not unusual in a situation that you're in, to not feel strong enough. What do you think about the idea of not feeling strong enough and being able to do it anyway? What about not feeling strong enough the whole time and being able to do it anyway?

Sharon: I can't do it. What I'm saying is that -- sorry. I'm sorry. But, like, you know, someone would just cry and cry and cry. Those were great interventions. You know, this was a coaching session. All of a sudden, I got somebody crying like crazy.

Glenn: First of all, people cry.

Sharon: It's the end of the session.

[0:12:30.9]

Glenn: I know. People cry. You treat it differently at the end of the session than you do in the middle of the session. Part of what that means is that towards the end of the session, you're going to interact with them a lot more --

Sharon: Can we do it the other way? Can I just try something, if you don't mind?

Glenn: Sure.

Sharon: Could you be the crier?

Glenn: No.

Sharon: Please cry.

Glenn: Okay. You want me to be a client who is terribly distraught at the end of the session and just can't face life alone? [crying] I hardly ever cry so --

Sharon: That's true.

Glenn: Well, I cried all the time when I was a kid. I got all my tears out.

Sharon: I'm so proud of you for crying. This is wonderful.

Glenn: Thank you.

Sharon: I think it would be really wonderful for you, after we get off the phone and over the next couple of days, if you really let yourself cry some more. Crying is wonderful. It's really healing and cathartic.

Glenn: Yeah, that's good.

Sharon: Yay.

Glenn: The one piece that I would add is that, I'm going to be really curious what the words are behind the tears. I'm always pushing to people to put things in words.

Sharon: Yeah. I remember that one session that we were in, years ago, when you and I first got together.

Glenn: That was, like, 40 years ago. I know what you mean.

[0:13:38.4]

Sharon: That guy who cried and cried and cried. There were no words. He cried for, like, a half an hour, an hour, I don't know. It was some crazy amount of time.

Glenn: That was a therapy session and not a coaching session. I don't think the therapist did the right thing there.

Sharon: It was blubbering. I don't mean that in a pejorative way. It wasn't words.

Glenn: It gets at the question about what's maturational. It's certainly maturational to accept your feelings and have constructive ways of letting them out. Most people have developed defenses against their tears, have pushed them down, and spent a lot of energy not really letting themselves have those feelings. But, another way of staying stuck is to get involved with the tears and try to relive where you were. It's almost like -- you think about the 1960's touchy, feely, emotional marathons where people would smack pillows and scream.

Sharon: Right. Like, the Primal Scream stuff, yeah.

Glenn: I've seen people get very addicted to those and enjoy the feelings in them, but, I haven't seen their lives significantly improve as a result of that. I'm more interested, I think we need to be more interested as coaches, in helping their lives to improve. Their lives improve when they can put words to those feelings because when you put words to the feelings, you're adult intellect can kind of sort it all out. You say, "Oh, well, that's how I felt then. That's not really how it is now. There are these similarities, but, this is different. I have these other choices. I'm more capable in this way."

Sharon: Babies don't have words, that's why they need to cry. It's a way of communicating.

Glenn: As a coach, sometimes, you need to let the emotion happen.

Sharon: I think crying is fabulous, but, I think you're right about what are the words behind it.

Glenn: What are the words behind it. In the middle of a session, if someone's doing it, you have a lot more leeway to let it happen. At the end of the session, I mean, you want to be compassionate and human, but you don't want to reward the client for emoting at the end of the session and develop a pattern like that.

Sharon: Right.

[0:15:33.4]

Glenn: The way to fix that is to talk a little bit more. Gently, like I was doing with you, but talk a little bit more. Push a little sooner for the words. You say, "You know, we have another minute or two. Can you tell me what you're crying about?" Then, you've got to have some suggestions for them. Like, if a little girl is crying, she's really scared because, you know, Maria won't give her the ball, she lost her dolly, whatever, then you, "Oh, why don't you go back over to Maria? There's this other dolly over there." You say, "Maria, why don't we play with this doll?" See, you'd be talking to her right away. You wouldn't just let her cry and scream, and cry and scream because she would get all worked up. You'd be talking to her right away.

When a client feels incapable of going out of the room by their own -- first of all, you probably let them get too regressed before that and you needed to be talking to them 10 or 15 minutes before the session stops, so, you were interacting and they wouldn't get that regressed. But if they're having a regression, you need to have some nurturing suggestions for them to help them along their way.

Sharon: Telling someone that, "It's great that you cry. That's okay. You can do that." Then, asking them, what's your plan for this week with regard to your program, asking them some grounding questions and things that are more adult-ish, things that we do as adults, so that they can make an easier transition.

Glenn: Yeah. The hardest thing to recognize is that if your clients are consistently not leaving on time, and you're consistently having trouble ending the sessions, it's because you don't want them to leave.

Sharon: Right, I get it.

Glenn: Because it's not really that hard, unless they're crazy. Remember, we don't really work with crazy people. People that come for a coach, they want a constructive, cooperative relationship. Even though they might feel a little regressed sometimes because you're focusing on them, they recognize that it's a professional relationship. They want you to feel your needs are being met and the relationship true to the extent that you've agreed upon. It's just not that hard. It's just not that hard to end unless you don't want it to end. If you don't want it to end, well, good for you that you have those feelings because, you know, you can look forward to every client that you see.

Sharon: At the same time, for it to be most effective, you need to have boundaries.

[0:17:28.5]

Glenn: What you could tell yourself is, "If I operate in a way to be most effective, then, this client is going to grow more. He'll be able to afford two sessions a week with me or four sessions a month", when they're only coming twice a month. "I'll actually get to watch them grow. They're going to appreciate it more. They're going to bond to me." I mean, a lot of these clients will bond to you for life. Some of them will keep coming, some of them will go away and then come back again, but --

Sharon: You'll have an indelible impact on them. They'll remember you -- you know, how you helped them forever.

Glenn: I had a guy come running up in the street to meet in the Bronx. I was in the middle of the street, crossing Morris Park Boulevard. He came running up to me in the street. He says, "Dr. Livingston, Dr. Livingston, you never cut me down. You gave me all these feedbacks. I thought you cut me down because you were this big

shot. I wasn't sure that I could really do this. You never cut me down. I always remember that. I just wanted to tell you." I said, "Could you tell me on the sidewalk? Can we just walk? Could we just go to the other side?"

Sharon: That's cool.

Glenn: Yeah. I just think if there's anything else that really stops people from ending the session on time.

Sharon: I think you're right. It's like, you know, our attachment to these people because we like them. Sometimes, I think even if it's the other way around that you are working with them, maybe they're not your favorite person, you want to give them because you feel guilty that they're not your favorite person.

Glenn: Yes, that's possible. Here are a couple of other scenarios. One other scenario is, you don't really like the person coming up after the person leaves. It's almost like they're two dishes being served. You want to keep eating the first one because the second is broccoli or brussels sprouts or something like that.

Sharon: Right. How to give it to Stewie.

Glenn: That's just something to be aware of. When you don't like a client -- you can help clients you don't like. But, if you don't like them, you could consider that a personal challenge.

Sharon: Exactly, exactly.

[0:19:05.3]

Glenn: Some of the clients, I like the least, wind up being the clients that I like the most.

Sharon: They change.

Glenn: Because they changed me. Because they really challenged me, they changed me.

Sharon: Yeah. In general, coaches tend to over-give. They're caregivers. They think -- we think that our role in the world is give. It makes it hard in that way, I think. It's self concept.

Glenn: I'm thinking about a guy that came in. It was a couple that came in. But, mostly, it was the man that was talking. They came about 20 minutes late. He said -- this is for psychotherapy, not for coaching, but it's the same dynamic. He said, "You know, I can't ever see this working for me because I just can't deal with the fact that the session comes to an end, you go talk to someone else. I feel like I should be able to talk longer."

Sharon: I think that's wonderful that he said that.

Glenn: Isn't that wonderful that he could actually come in and say that?

Sharon: Oh, it is.

Glenn: Yeah.

Sharon: What guts.

Glenn: Yeah.

Sharon: Wow.

Glenn: That was very early in my practice. I didn't handle that one very well. What I would do --

Sharon: "Get out of my office, jerk."

Glenn: No. I actually kind of liked him. Between that one and the woman who called me and said she wants to make an appointment but her central problem is that she can't keep appointments.

Sharon: Oh my God, that's a problem.

[0:20:10.8]

Glenn: What I would have done with that guy now, I'd say, "Well, it sounds like you need an extra free session. It sounds like we should pick a time. After working for a while together, when you really feel like you should get an extra free session, I'll work it out to give you an extra free session. It sounds like you weren't given enough. You need a free session."

Sharon: That's awesome.

Glenn: That's probably what I would have done.

Sharon: That's awesome. I love that. I never heard you say that before. I love it.

Glenn: Well, it's very individual. I wouldn't do that with just anybody, but he just felt so depthfully wounded. He just couldn't believe anybody could genuinely care about him and still get paid and be working in this professional way. I had those feelings about him. I really wanted to help him.

Sometimes, it happens in the academy. Sometimes, people don't really have a lot of money but they really want to be a good coach. I can feel the connection and I think they should be. Sometimes, they object to getting on a payment plan right

away because the classes are starting for a month and a half. They don't understand they need to reserve a spot. Sometimes, I'll say, "Well, okay, I'll trust you. If you want to pay me from August until January instead of July till December, I'll trust you."

If people have a constructive reason, if you can tell that they've got a constructive motivation for wanting something different, I'll try to go along with it and give it to them. I'm really not trying to create an army of duplicates. I'm trying to coach people's creative motivation out of them. I try to be very sensitive to what their constructive motivation is. I'll bend myself a little like a pretzel, if I can, to help them with that. But, not so far that I can't practice anymore. In case of the academy, not so far that I would jeopardize the academy's finances, but I'll work with them.

Does this help to answer the question about how do you end a session?

Sharon: I think so.

Glenn: Let's just talk about a little more practicality.

Sharon: Okay.

Glenn: I think it's good to give the client a chance to say one or two last things. What that means is, usually, two, maybe three minutes, before the session

[0:21:51.6]

ends. You say, "You know, I think we need to start to begin to wind down our session." Start to begin to wind down our session, so, it's not an abrupt, boot them out the door with your foot.

Sharon: Bye.

Glenn: Right. If there's anything else you want to ask me, or tell me about, or a question you had, or concern, or anything else that you wanted to articulate before we left, we could have to do it. Actually, I don't usually say "concern". I'm not sure why I said that just then. I don't invite them to have a concern. I just ask if they have any questions or --

Sharon: Is there anything else you want to talk about for the next minute or two as we're beginning to end?

Glenn: Yes.

Sharon: Yeah. I like to help them get back into their day by asking them about, "What are you going to do next?"

Glenn: Yeah, yeah.

Sharon: Because that helps them to become adult again. Because, even though, it's a coaching session, there is some regression.

Glenn: Then we sing the end-of-the-session song. The end of the session now and how --

Sharon: Goodbye, farewell, Auf Wiedersehen, adieu.

Glenn: -- and how, the end of the session now.

Sharon: Adieu, adieu to you and you and you.

Glenn: Got to sing the end-of-the-session song.

Sharon: Right. This sounds like the end of the session.

Glenn: It does.

Sharon: Anything else you want to say before we begin to start to end?

Glenn: I just really hope that people know I was kidding about the end-of-the-session song. Bye, sweetheart.

[0:23:06.0]

Sharon: Bye, honey.

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