Life coaching is a partnership through which coaches help clients to achieve goals, overcome challenges, and enhance well-being. While the purpose of therapy is to heal the patient, the purpose of coaching is to help the client design and live the best life possible. Coaches work with individuals, couples, or groups and interact with clients through face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations, or Internet discussions. The coaching field has been called a “natural home” for positive psychology (PP) because it provides an ideal medium for applying the principles of positive psychological science.

In recent years, coaching has changed both in its popularity and in the extent to which it is based on empirical evidence. The number of professional coaches and coaching clients has surged; tens of thousands of people now make their livings as coaches, or integrate coaching practices into their professions. Many of the early coaches began their work by using interventions that, although potentially effective, were not empirically tested. The life coaching field emerged from the human potential movement, and, when the field was younger, successes were often self-proclaimed or based on unrepresentative anecdotal accounts. As the profession moves from the first to the second generation of practitioners, it is outgrowing its dependence on gurus and focusing more on reliable, rigorous, scientific evidence. A recent definition of coaching psychology suggests that it is “grounded in established adult learning or psychological approaches,” alluding to the scientific underpinnings that are becoming an increasingly integral part of coaching practice (Palmer & Whybrow, 2005, p. 7). The transition to a more evidence-based paradigm, in fact, has come to fruition in the newly-defined sub-field of PP coaching. After providing an orientation to coaching, this article will discuss how the field can be enhanced by assessments, theories, and interventions that have been developed through the science of PP.

Life Coaching: A Brief Introduction

Life coaching involves more than just achieving goals. Clients develop awareness of their values and aspirations through coach-guided and self-directed learning processes, and strive to transform their lives such that their daily activities reflect these values and aspirations. The coaching process also involves overcoming challenges by applying strengths, improving work performance, and enhancing psychological well-being.

An effective coaching relationship is essential to achieving these aims. Gable and Haidt (2005) have defined PP as “the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (p. 104), and a solid coaching relationship is one example of a condition that helps people to flourish. While medicine and psychotherapy use a hierarchical “expert model,” coaching utilizes an egalitarian, “coactive” model. Coach and client “design a relationship” that serves the client’s ultimate agenda. Designing optimal coaching relationships, and using these relationships to provide outstanding coaching, requires that coaches develop competencies including: active listening, powerful questioning, creating awareness, designing actions, goal setting, and managing accountability.

A typical coaching session might include a lively dialogue designed to heighten awareness of core values, identify goals, assess how realistic those goals are, and explore gaps between who the client is
and who he or she would like to become. The client-coach dyad (or group) might then develop multiple strategies for achieving goals and narrowing the aforementioned gaps. They would likely create specific learning or action plans, and then use mechanisms like cocreated accountability to ensure adherence to these plans.

Coaching sessions can be highly energizing, both for the client and for the coach. Although it has not demonstrated empirically, our experience suggests that the positive affect arising from coaching sessions often ignites an upward spiral. The increased positive affect that clients tend to experience often leads to a broadening and building of their thought-action repertoires, which may in turn help clients to achieve goals, overcome challenges, and perform more effectively. If achieving goals, overcoming challenges, and improving performance further increase positive affect, an upward spiral can ensue.

The processes of life coaching are highly concordant with the fundamentals of positive psychology. Both fields focus on core values, intrinsic motivations, and strengths. Interventions developed within positive psychology, like those developed within coaching, are intended to amplify self-efficacy, positive affect, hope, flow states, life satisfaction, and well-being. Both fields, of course, focus on more than just correcting deficiencies.

**Positive Psychology Assessment, Theory, and Intervention**

Incorporating PP into coaching involves thoughtful and ongoing assessment of clients, application of continually-evolving theory and research, and careful application of novel interventions. Scales developed within PP can be used to assess clients at baseline, and to monitor the effectiveness of the coaching process, as accurately as possible. Although psychological assessment might seem simple when first glancing at surveys, psychometrics is a complex science. Instruments that are applicable to coaching include the Steen Happiness Index, the General Happiness Scale, the Satisfaction with Life Scale, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule, and the Values in Action Institute Signature Strengths Questionnaire. A comprehensive catalogue and description of these assessments is outside the scope of this work, and more information on PP assessment is available elsewhere within this volume.

Many of the theories developed within PP – and the empirical findings associated with these theories – can also guide the coaching approach. Seligman’s view of happiness, for example, may reveal which areas of life coaches should focus on to help clients achieve greater life satisfaction. Evidence suggests that satisfaction with life is associated more strongly with engagement and meaning than it is with positive emotion, so a coach seeking to increase a client’s life satisfaction might focus on interventions that bolster engagement and meaning. C. R. Snyder’s theory of hope suggests that, in order to increase clients’ hopefulness, it may be useful to identify specific actions that can move clients closer to their goals, and to bolster clients’ beliefs in their abilities to carry out those actions. Other theories that may inform and enhance coaching practice include Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow experiences, Lyubomirsky’s theories regarding the determinants of sustained happiness, Fredrickson’s broaden and build theory of positive emotions, and numerous other PP theories.

Based on these theories, positive psychologists have developed interventions that can be invaluable for improving the coaching process. These interventions can be categorized into those that focus on increasing positive emotion regarding the past, present, and future; those designed to make individuals more engaged in their work and personal lives; and those that make life more meaningful. The
Gratitude Visit, for example, involves connecting with positive emotions about the past (i.e., gratitude directed toward somebody who has helped you), by writing a letter of gratitude to a person who has made a difference in your life, and then reading the letter to the “gratitude recipient.” Bryant and Veroff’s Savoring interventions involve cultivating deliberate conscious attention to pleasant experiences in the present through techniques like sharing experiences with others and sensing without thinking. King, Lyubomirsky, and others use the Best Possible Future Self intervention that requires that people envision and write about their “ideal selves” in the future. In addition to increasing positive affect, this intervention may help to cultivate positive cognitions and optimism. Seligman has also developed numerous learned optimism techniques that help bolster positive emotion regarding the future. McDermott and Snyder’s Making Hope Happen program is an intervention that helps people increase levels of hopefulness regarding future events.

Other interventions serve to enhance well-being by increasing the capacity to fully engage in activities. Creating the conditions that facilitate flow (e.g., a balance of challenge and skill, clear goals and feedback, etc.) in work can be harnessed to help people achieve greater engagement, and can also improve performance. Identifying and applying signature strengths can also be used to recraft work in order to help people feel more engaged.

Finding meaning is highly associated with well-being, and involves activities that make the world a better place. Seligman (2002, p. 263) suggests that meaning is most likely to ensue from “using your signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are.” One might, for example, apply the strength of creativity to design interventions that help people lead happier lives. There are also more extensive systems that combine many PP interventions in organized and synergistic ways, such as Well-Being Therapy and Quality of Life Therapy. These are a few of the many empirically-validated PP interventions that are applicable to coaching.

The Future of Positive Psychology and Coaching

While positive psychology has elucidated many ways that coaches can work more effectively with clients, fundamental questions remain. How can clients best be matched with coaches? How can PP interventions be matched with unique clients under unique circumstances? When should clients seek psychotherapy rather than coaching, and when should psychotherapists refer their clients to a coach? How can scientist-coaches best be trained to apply the science of PP? Continued PP research will probably reveal some answers to these questions, and provide more assessments, theories, and interventions to apply within coaching contexts. As positive psychologists continue to broaden and improve the repertoire of tools that can be applied by coaches, the collaboration between PP and coaching will develop into a more mutually-beneficial partnership that will further enhance coaches’ capacities to transform the lives of their clients.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Character strengths (VIA) ▶ Gratitude ▶ Hope ▶ Positive emotions

References

Carol Kauffman

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/life_coaching

Chicago


Harvard


MLA