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The practice of positive psychology coaching

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ABSTRACT

Coaching facilitates the learning, growth, and performance of clients. This process is a natural fit for positive psychology intervention because of a shared emphasis on positive topics such as optimism, strengths, and motivation. Over the past 15 years in the field, the author's opinions about positive psychology coaching have evolved. This paper outlines his current thinking, highlights how this thinking differs from earlier thoughts and offers practitioners specific issues for consideration. These include (A) creating conditions that will enhance the success of positive psychology interventions in coaching, (B) avoiding prescriptiveness, (C) accessing a wide range of positive psychological science to inform practice, and D) taking an ethical approach to intervention.

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Introduction

Positive psychology can bolster the coaching industry by enhancing public trust, improving training, and testing the effectiveness of interventions. The idea of evidence-based coaching is not new. A. Grant (2003) was among the first to advocate for more rigor in coaching. Although this is a laudable goal, it is difficult to research coaching. It is unclear, for instance, if investigators should prioritize return-on-investment (ROI), efficacy, trust, or problem-solving when evaluating coaching outcomes (A. Grant, 2013). A. Grant (2016) offers a broad framework for what constitutes 'evidence,' including professional wisdom gained through experience, coaching specific research, and coaching relevant research.

It is on this last point – coaching relevant research – that positive psychology shows the greatest potential for contribution. Positive psychology coaching, like its conceptual cousin, coaching psychology, prioritizes science as a method of inquiry. In theory, this means that the results from such research are superior to opinion, pseudo-science, and anecdotal evidence because science allows for:

- better generalization of results
- better understanding of causal mechanisms
- better confidence in findings through replication
- better updates to practice as new insights emerge.

Let's take a single example from positive psychology – strengths – and apply it to coaching. Strengths, the behaviors at which people excel, have long been subject

to religious, philosophical, and lay scrutiny (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Recently, scholar with an empirical focus have investigated the outcomes related to strengths use (Park et al., 2004), and used wait-list controlled studies of strengths interventions (Proyer et al., 2015, 2012). This emerging science can guide practice. For example, initial research has revealed that those who focus on developing strengths show greater gains in personal growth than do those who focus on overcoming deficiencies (Van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015).

Considerations for positive psychology coaching

Given that positive psychological science produces new results, we ought to expect changes in our knowledge of and application of these topics and interventions. I argue here that one sign of a mature profession is the modification and improvement of practice over time. Personally, I am skeptical of approaches to coaching that represent internally consistent worldviews and models that do not evolve. Candidly, I have changed many of my own views regarding the practice of positive psychology coaching over the last 15 years. Here, I will discuss four specific considerations for practice, each of which represents a topic about which my views have evolved over time:

- (1) *Non-prescriptiveness*. Most coaches support self-directed learning and eschew offering advice to clients. This, in my opinion, presents a problem for those wishing to employ positive psychology interventions in a prescriptive way. In the past, I have

advocated the use of artificial and formulaic ‘happiness interventions’ (Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007; Biswas-Diener, 2010). These include empirically investigated practices such as keeping a gratitude journal (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Upon reflection, I now advise coaches *not* to use these approaches.

My change of stance reflects an emphasis on ‘coaching’ over ‘positive psychology’ in *positive psychology coaching*. That is, at its heart, positive psychology coaching is coaching. This means that the client controls the agenda and has ultimate say in the direction of the coaching conversation and any behavioral commitments that result from it. The standard positive psychology interventions stand in stark contrast to this: they may have little bearing on a client’s explicit goals and are often offered to clients in a highly prescriptive way. I believe this robs clients of the potential empowerment of creating their own ‘homework.’ For example, a coach who asks ‘how might you better cultivate a sense of appreciation’ treats her client as more resourceful than does a coach who says ‘each day this week, you should write down three things for which you feel grateful.’

Positive psychology has a cart-before-horse phenomenon regarding interventions. Researchers need to operationalize phenomena in order to study them effectively. This means isolating or simplifying constructs that, in daily life, are neither isolated nor simple. For instance, researchers interested in the relation between gratitude and happiness need a means of to evaluate gratitude. In one study, the researchers instructed participants to think about the previous week and write ‘up to five things in your life that you are grateful or thankful for’ (McCullough et al., 2002). Later researchers asked participants to write ‘three things that went well each day and their causes every night for one week’ (Seligman et al., 2005). These, and similar studies, yielded insight into the various benefits related to cultivating a habit of gratitude. The problem, where coaching is concerned, is that these simplistic behaviors (listing blessings on a regular basis) became known as empirically validated interventions. Interventionists began seeing these artificial exercises as tested and effective. As gratitude goes, however, listing on a sheet of paper is far removed from real-world gratitude practices such as praying, saying ‘thank you,’ writing thank you cards, and gift giving. This is not to dismiss the potential benefits of journaling but, rather, to suggest that the emphasis on journaling as an intervention is myopic.

- (1) *Meta intervention*. All applied sciences face the challenge of translating research into practice. This can be seen in clinical psychology. Although

there is an abundance of research on depression, for example, it can be a tricky business to intervene in depression. Psychotherapists are tasked with the challenge of consuming the research and then individualizing intervention so that it might be most effectively employed with their clients (Stricker & Trierweiler, 2006).

Coaches who are eager to align themselves with empirically supported practice often face the same issue. My caution here is that interventions are not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. For example, although there is body of research suggesting that attention to strengths can be useful (e.g. Proyer et al., 2012; Quinlan et al., 2012) there is also evidence that interventions are best when tailored to individuals (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013).

Coaches can enhance the potential effectiveness of positive psychology by spending time to create a coaching culture, with roles and norms, that support positive psychology. For example, people from many cultures place a premium on humility and it can, therefore, be uncomfortable to speak openly about personal strengths. Coaches can create a supportive context for a strengths-focus by emphasizing confidentiality, norms for non-judgment, and by using client-created labels for various strengths. The norms established early in the coaching relationship act as a ‘meta-intervention’ that influences the success of each discreet intervention (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011).

- (1) *Science literacy*. Responsible coaches need to be trained in basic scientific concepts, be able to critically consume research, and be committed to keeping abreast of developments in the field. Science literacy is a continuum, perhaps, that ranges from no understanding of theory of science to expert knowledge of statistical analysis. If coaches align themselves with science, they need to have a basic understanding of research methods, the peer review process, and basic concepts in statistics such as mean and correlation. I would also suggest that they exhibit sophistication in topics that they advertise as areas of expertise. For example, a coach who markets her practice as being informed by neuroscience ought to know the geography of the nervous system, the mechanisms by which neurons function, the distinction between neurotransmitters and hormones, and the methods by which researchers study the nervous system. Unfortunately, the marriage of scientific literacy and coaching skills has been difficult to professionally regulate. The major professional bodies of

coaching, and most certificate training programs, do not offer oversight in scientific literacy. This is, I believe, a case in favor of university-based programs that offer diplomas and degrees in coaching psychology or applied positive psychology.

- (2) *Ethical foundation.* A final consideration concerns the importance of establishing an ethical foundation for positive psychology coaching. Coaching is an industry that is only loosely regulated and there are many practicing coaches who have no formal training and are not members of an established professional body. This means that A) they are not subject to ethical oversight, B) they may not have training in reflective practice and ethical decision making, and C) they do not have an explicit code of ethics to guide them. This worry is compounded by the notion that many coaches are more likely to emphasize the 'positive' in positive psychology than they are to emphasize the 'psychology.' An emphasis on the latter carries an appreciation that coaching influences people's identities, behaviors, relationships, feelings, and thoughts. As such, there is always potential for harm. I would caution practitioners against interpreting the 'positive' in positive psychology as meaning that the outcomes of intervention will necessarily be positive. For example, Sergeant and Mongrain (2011) found that gratitude interventions could adversely affect the self-esteem of people with a depressive personality style. Similarly, some researchers have found potentially harmful side effects of mindfulness practice (Lindahl et al., 2017). Such examples offer a caution against assuming positive psychology will always yield positive results. I encourage all coaching and positive psychology training programs to emphasize beneficence, non-maleficence, and other ethical principles.

Conclusion

When I look back on my thinking about positive psychology coaching – a period spanning from my first publication on the topic in 2007 until the present – I am encouraged. First, I am reassured by the fact that much of what me and my fellow pioneers espoused in the early days has since benefited from subsequent empirical support. For example, there is mounting evidence that a focus on strengths can be productive. Although this topic is now decades old, emerging research offers new insights by focusing on specific strengths (Proyer et al., 2012), replicating earlier research (Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012), and suggesting routes for

development (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). I am also encouraged by practices we have since abandoned. For example, as research suggests individualizing intervention (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014) coaches can be more sophisticated in how they use positive psychology. It is because positive psychology is a dynamic as a system of knowledge that we can welcome changes in our collective knowledge and interpret them as professional growth.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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