

Positive psychology techniques – Positive case conceptualisation

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This short techniques article is part of a series of papers and builds on the initial outline paper which explored the potential of positive psychology approaches within coaching (Passmore & Oades, 2014). This paper focuses on the skill of positive case conceptualisation, which allows coach and coachee to work collaboratively on building a shared understanding of the positive issues under discussion.

Keywords: case conceptualisation; positive case conceptualisation; positive diagnosis; coaching mind maps; positive psychology; positive psychology coaching.

Case conceptualisation (CC)

THE CONCEPT of case conceptualisation has derived from work within therapy, and is commonly used in cognitive behavioural therapy. Counselling psychologists have defined the term as:

‘Case formulation aims to describe a person’s presenting problems and a theory to make explanatory inferences about causes and maintaining factors that can inform interventions. First, there is a top-down process of cognitive behavioural theory providing clinically useful descriptive frameworks. Second the formulation enables practitioners and clients to make explanatory inferences about what caused and maintains the presenting issues. Thirdly case formulation explicitly and centrally informs intervention. Case formulation is a cornerstone of evidence-based CBT practice. For any particular case of CBT practice, formulation is the bridge between practice and theory and research. It is the crucible, where the individual particularities of a given case relevant theory and research synthesise into an understanding of the persons presenting issues in CBT’ (Kuyken et al., 2009, p.42).

In short, case conceptualisation is the formation of a rationale and framework, underpinned by an evidence base, to summarise the therapists thinking and inform their future work with the client.

Positive case conceptualisation (PCC)

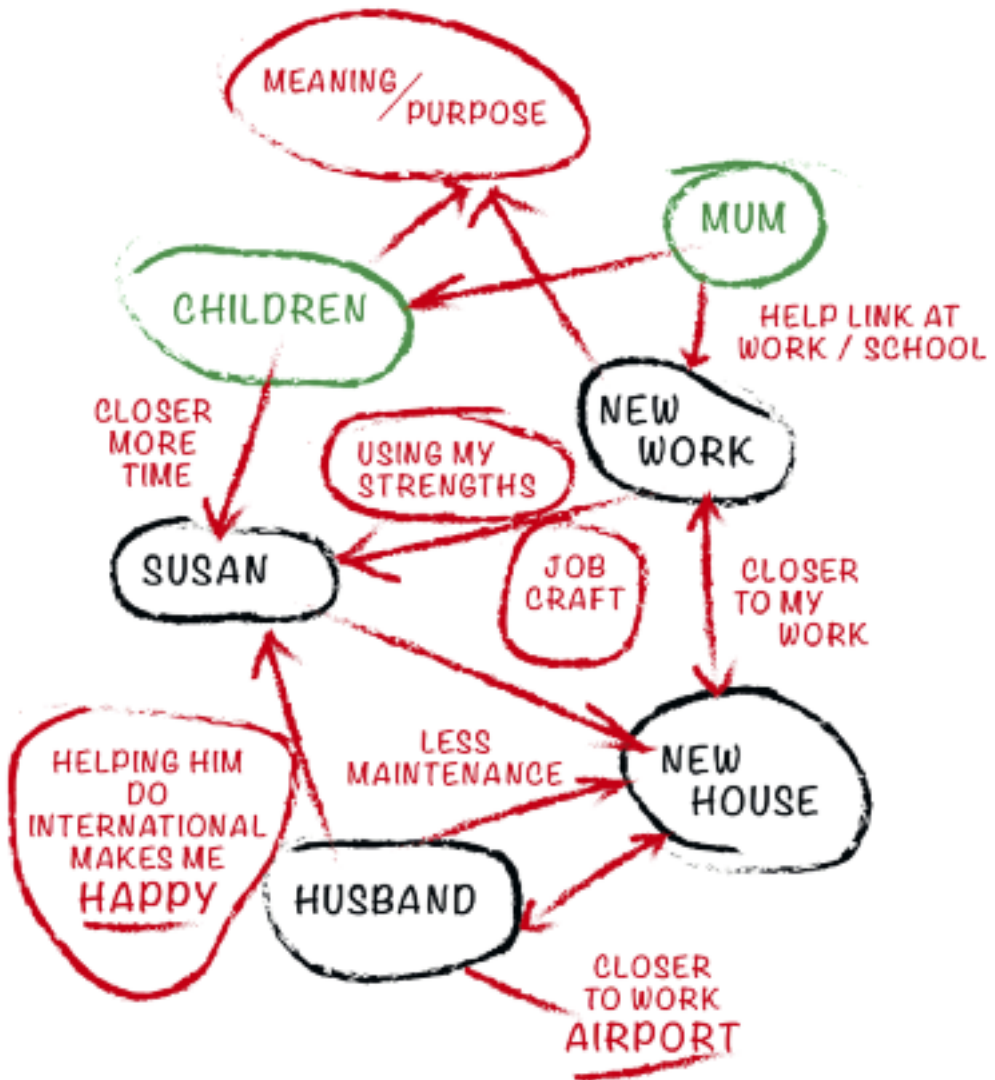
Lane and Corrie (2009) importantly identified the issue of case conceptualisation in coaching psychology practice, and suggested there was value in coaches reflecting on the presenting evidence and formulating an evidenced-based approach to address the issue.

Others (Biswas-Diener & Ebooks, 2010) have used slightly different language, such as Positive Diagnosis, to consider similar issues. The concept has also been used in solution-focused approaches (Green, Oades & Grant, 2006). Drawing on these writers and the application of CC in CBT, we have developed the ideas into a positive psychological based approach (Oades & Passmore, 2014).

In Figure 1, we have used a real life example from a personal coaching assignment which one of the authors was engaged on.

This illustration shows how the coach and coachee make sense of the relationships between key aspects of the person’s psychological and social world, using key concepts within positive psychology, such as strengths, positive emotions and meaning. The aim here is not to ‘diagnose’, by finding deficits or causes of the coachees’ perceived problems, but rather to reconfigure possibilities and look for opportunities. The positive case conceptualisation examines what the

Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of positive case conceptualisation developed during coaching.



solution looks like. The conceptualisation is of a possible preferred situation and how it relates. In this example, new opportunities came from exploring the new work and new house possibilities. The coachee started to see several opportunities once those two changes were conceptualised as part of a bigger solution including living closer to work, being closer to the airport for her husband and greater involvement of the coachee's mum in looking after children. These possibilities arose iteratively as the case was conceptualised through a positive and solution-based lens.

A key guiding question is *'If things are functioning really well, and people in the system are feeling good, what does it look like?'* Hence, whilst the coaching may be triggered by a problem, difficulty or transition, the PCC itself seeks to identify what things functioning well look like, using the language of positive psychology and the science of well-being applied to the context.

What we have found works well is to draw this as a mind map, rather than a linear list, which allows for the opportunity to show relationships/links between the different aspects identified. By using different colours the mindmap can be further enhanced.

Biswas-Diener and Ebooks (2010) describe three core areas of PCC as: (a) a positive focus; (b) benefits of positive emotion; and (c) the science of strengths. Whilst this is appropriate, the conceptualisation expands these three areas to include a greater emphasis on the sustainable well-being (eudaimonic well-being) components, which emphasises the importance of meaning in life, a sense of purpose and striving towards one's perceived full potential.

Conclusion

The technique offers an opportunity to apply creativity in the coaching conversation and for the coach and coachee to work together to build a shared understanding of the positive aspects of the issue under discussion.

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