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Introduction.

Mention ‘life coaching’ to any clinical psychologist and reactions typically range from pure scepticism to enthusiastic optimism. Such is the divergence and diversity of both knowledge and opinion on the subject that the purpose of this article is to answer some of the main questions that clinical psychologists commonly ask about life coaching. With this aim in mind, we hope to clear up this confusion by informing clinicians about the profession of life coaching.

What is life coaching?

Currently there is much uncertainty, both in lay and professional circles, as to what exactly life coaching is. This is primarily due to the life coaching profession being so new, and also because the media and life coaches utilise varying terminology to describe themselves and their practice (Ellis, 2000). For example, other popular terms for life coaching include; personal coaching, life development coaching, mind coaching, life training, personal consulting, or more recently, cognitive behavioural coaching or possibility counseling.

Terminological ambiguity aside, what exactly is life coaching? As life coaching is such a recent profession (and arguably some would not even call it a profession), which is still developing and evolving, there are many different definitions and conceptualisations of life coaching. The International Coach Federation (ICF), the largest international life coaching body, defines life coaching as:

“An ongoing relationship, which focuses on clients taking action towards the realization of their visions, goals, or desires. Coaching uses a process of inquiry and personal discovery to build the client’s level of awareness and responsibility, and provides the client with structure, support, and feedback. The coaching process helps clients both define and achieve professional and personal goals faster and with more ease than would be possible otherwise” (ICF, 2003).

Patrick Williams and Deborah Davis, two predominant authority figures in the life coaching field, define life coaching as:

“A powerful human relationship where trained coaches assist people to design their future rather than get over their past. Through a typically long-term relationship, coaches aid clients

in creating visions and goals for ALL aspects of their lives and creating multiple strategies to support achieving those goals. Coaches recognise the brilliance of each client and their personal power to discover their own solutions when provided with support, accountability and unconditional positive regard” (2002, p. xv).

Andrea Molloy, one of New Zealand’s top profile life coaches, provides the following definition of a life coach: “A life coach facilitates, encourages and motivates you to set and reach effective personal or professional goals for a more successful life – the life you want!” (Molloy, 2003, p. 6).

Thus, life coaching essentially involves assisting and facilitating an individual’s personal and professional development by helping them realise their potential. Generally speaking, life coaches help individuals become more personally effective in their everyday lives, and help them take the steps to make their dreams a reality (Fortgang, 2001). Several common threads capture the essence of life coaching and run through various eclectic life coaching approaches. For example, life coaching has a distinct focus on the future rather than the past, is based on the belief that it is goals that drive actions, that there are multiple paths to reach each a goal, and that the client knows, or will come to realise, their own way forward.

Where did life coaching come from?

In a practical sense, life coaching originated in the United States in the early nineteen nineties (Richardson, 1998), and has rapidly spread world wide, however life coaching has only had a presence in New Zealand in the past 5 to 10 years. Life coaching developed because society has gone from being stable and mostly predictable to being fast paced, impersonal, and constantly evolving. As such, life coaching has originated as a response to handle both the exponential speed of societal change, as well as the increased complexity inherent in society.

In a theoretical sense, life coaching has developed from three main streams: 1) helping professions, such as psychotherapy and counseling, 2) consulting, organizational development, and industrial psychology, and 3) various personal development training approaches, such as the likes of Anthony Robbins. Of these three, life coaching has its roots mostly in modern psychology and counseling theories. Psychological theories of adult development (i.e., Freud, Jung, Alder, Erickson), the broader humanistic psychology movement (i.e., Maslow, Lewin, Pearls), client-centered therapy (i.e., Rogers), systemic therapies (i.e., Haley, Satir), and also the new approaches neuro-linguistic programming (i.e., Bandler & Grindler), solution-focused therapy (i.e., de Shazer) and narrative therapy (i.e., White) have all had an impact. What most of these approaches have in common is a rejection of the medical model, the paradigm of pathology, and the specific problem focus, and rather an adoption of a paradigm of possibility, viewing

clients as whole and seeking a richer life and solutions to their problems. These various approaches, and a combination there of, have laid much of the groundwork for modern coaching theory, perspectives and techniques and have set the framework for life coaching's 'whole person' focus.

Conversely, many of the newer forms of psychotherapy have either embraced principles of life coaching, or begun to look more like coaching programs. For example, Miller and Rollnick of 'motivational interviewing' fame, note that "change is motivated by a perceived discrepancy between present behaviour and important personal goals or values" (2002, p. 39).

What does life coaching involve?

Similar to therapy, most life coaches typically see clients on a weekly basis for approximately three months. This is based on the reasoning that a three month period is typically the minimum amount of time it takes to make, reinforce, and solidify *major* changes in a person's life. During coaching sessions, a specific process is sequentially worked through which covers three integrated areas; 1) identifying where the client currently is in their life, 2) recognizing their goals and where they want to be, and 3) on how they can best close this gap between these two positions.

Typical components of a life coaching process could include; completing a global life or values assessment, utilising appropriate and realistic goal setting, developing action plans, utilising effective planning, learning relaxation skills and controlling stress, implementing and managing self-care or simplification strategies, increasing energy levels, and challenging self-limiting beliefs. Which particular component or activity is utilised depends on the client's present focus and the particular challenges they currently face. Regardless of the component or activity, the coaches' role is to keep the client focused, motivated, purposeful and accountable.

What do people use life coaches for?

People use life coaches for a wide variety of reasons. Common uses include; to manage stress better, becoming healthier (e.g., lose weight, stop smoking, etc), balance their work and personal lives better, kick-start or rejuvenate a career, redesign or find a direction in life, become more focused, enhance their workplace effectiveness or increase their motivation, become more organised and manage their life better, increase their confidence in a particular area of their lives, achieve to the best of their ability and potential, set and obtain wanted goals, or to communicate with people better.

How much training do life coaches do?

Although most clinical psychologists in New Zealand complete a diploma in clinical psychology, which usually takes around six or seven years of study (approximately 10,000 hours), *most* life coaches only complete short three month, part-time, standardised “one-size fits all”, courses, or even less training, if at all. It is not unusual for the required face-to-face contact time of these courses to be less than 20 hours. Given this substantial difference, the question really becomes an ethical one as to whether the coach is competent enough, has the required skills and knowledge, in order to influence someone’s life in a major way after such training, and *usually* without any supervision or safety net!

How successful is life coaching?

The empirical answer to this question is: ‘we don’t know’, as there have been no empirically based controlled clinical trials or comparisons. However, observations and informal reports from both life coaches and their clientele are extremely encouraging regarding its effectiveness. Whereas efficacy rates for treatment approaches such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) are usually estimated and reported around the 60 to 80 percent range (e.g., see Young, Beck & Weinberger, 2001), thus meaning that roughly two out of every three people are successfully treated with CBT, from our experience of working with clients, efficacy rates may be even higher.

What are the differences between life coaching and clinical psychology?

There are many important differences between life coaching and clinical psychology. Firstly, all life coaching clients have a distinct hunger for change, whereas this is not always the case with a clinical client. People seek coaching because they want to change, not because they need to. Secondly, most therapists view change as occurring over a period of time, whereas many life coaches (although not ourselves) assume the probability of rapid results based change. Thirdly, given the different client starting positions, the inherent dangers are less substantial for a life coaching client given that they are not generally emotionally or intellectually fragile. Fourthly, as a profession, clinical psychology is more solidified, structured and regulated, whereas life coaching is still very much evolving. As such, variability of coaches, approaches and effectiveness is enormous. Fifthly, the changes life coaching clients make are usually more global, ‘whole person’ changes, and thus, the implications of such changes can be huge. Sixthly, the life coaching client is wholly accountable for their actions, and thus responsible for their successes. In other words, there is less responsibility placed on the service provider. Seventhly, life coaching moves away from the paradigm of pathology towards a paradigm of possibility. Eighthly, telecoaching is a popular service delivery method for life coaching, whereas teletherapy can be risky depending on the client. Telecoaching can be done from anywhere and expands the possible clientele base.

Lastly, the clientele for the clinician are limited to those disordered and diagnosable, whereas the clientele for life coaches are almost limitless.

What are the similarities between life coaching and clinical psychology?

There are many similarities between life coaching and clinical psychology. Firstly, both the life coach and clinical psychologist occupy a professional helper role. Secondly, both processes involve an ongoing and confidential relationship. Thirdly, both use dialogue as the primary vehicle for delivering their service. Fourthly, both are structured in that they regularly schedule sessions, assign homework, work through an agenda, etc. Fifthly, both the life coach and clinical psychologist provide the client with an objective and impartial viewpoint. Lastly, both the life coach and therapist work in collaboration with the client.

What we have provided is only a sample of the similarities and differences between life coaching and therapy, for a more detailed overview see Hart *et al.*, 2001, or Williams & Davis, 2002.

What are the benefits of life coaching?

Therapists who have transitioned into life coaching highlight four main benefits of incorporating life coaching into their practice. Firstly, clinical psychologists are wanting something more out of their helping relationships, as they describe feeling tired, burnt out, frustrated, discouraged, and unable to make a difference the way they once believed possible. In contrast, life coaching is generally much less stressful, as the clientele group are generally high functioning, exceedingly motivated, and well resourced. This provides the clinical psychologist with an opportunity to infuse new energy back into their own lives and clinical practice. Secondly, many ‘therapist-come-life-coaches’ find life coaching more rewarding, as the amount of change, because of the whole life focus, is usually larger and more global. Thirdly, life coaching is lucrative, as life coaches are currently earning slightly more than clinical psychologists. Because of over demand and under supply, life coaches are currently charging in the vicinity of \$100-150 per hour, with rates in excess of \$200 not unheard of. Fourthly, life coaching provides additional variety and professional challenges, as it offers a slightly different framework, and utilises a slightly different language from clinical practice. Such conceptual and practical changes can keep the clinician motivated and on their toes.

How do I become a life coach, or incorporate life coaching into my practice?

Although the profession of life coaching is still in its infancy, an increasing number of therapists are turning to, or incorporating, life coaching into their practice (Williams & Davis, 2002; Hudson, 1999). Of

all the professionals, clinical psychologists are uniquely positioned to move into, or transition to, this rapidly growing field, as they are experts in encouraging and facilitating change. Clinical psychologists' academic preparation and training as helping professionals is highly applicable and relevant to the coaching relationship.

Some of the transferable skills that clinical psychologists already have include, rapport building, listening, interviewing, process skills (note taking, agenda setting, assigning homework), conceptualisation, reframing, empathy, dealing with difficult issues and roadblocks, and are experienced with confidentiality and ethical standards. They are also unique in that they can draw on their previous experience in training and working with clinical clients. Thus becoming a coach usually requires only a little additional fine-tuning, specific skill building, and marketing know-how.

If you are considering incorporating life coaching into your practice, or utilising life coaching principles, there are many ways to becoming a life coach and we recommend the following. Firstly, get informed. Read some of the more central and popular books on life coaching. There are few credible life coaching books available, as most are what we would describe as 'pop' life coaching books, however two books in particular stand out. These are *Therapist as life coach: Transforming your practice* by Patrick Williams and Deborah Davis (2002) and *Life Coaching: A Cognitive Behavioral Approach* by Michael Neenan and Windy Dryden (2002). The first of these is more global and better all-round introduction to life coaching for therapists, and they describe their book as "one-stop shopping for the therapist wishing to explore the coaching field". The second book focuses on specific coaching techniques and problem areas (e.g., procrastination, time management, decision making, assertiveness, etc). Secondly, look at well established life coaching websites. Websites we would recommend as a starting reference include: www.coachfederation.org and www.lifecoachtraining.com, and obviously our own website: www.orangerocket.co.nz. Thirdly, consider undertaking the process of life coaching yourself, or alternatively, self coaching. This will really open your eyes to the power and potential of life coaching. Fourthly, approach a local life coach and negotiate a mentoring and supervision scheme. Lastly, attend meetings and talk to life coaches about the profession and its pros and cons.

What is the future of life coaching?

Life coaching is becoming more popular and prevalent, and is one of the youngest and fastest growing helping professions, both in New Zealand and globally (Neenan & Dryden, 2002; Hudson, 1999). In America, life coaching is the second biggest consulting industry after management consulting (Williams & Davis, 2002). Given life coaching's swift emergence, widespread reach, and marked similarity with clinical psychology, it is a growing profession that clinical psychologists cannot afford to ignore.

The future of life coaching looks exciting, as there is much room to move in research, theory and practice. Given that we traverse the fields of ‘life coaching’ and ‘clinical psychology’, we embrace hope for a few changes. Firstly, we would like to see an infusion of the advantageous elements and lessons that have been learned over the years in the field clinical psychology into the profession of life coaching. For instance, taking a more empirical attitude to practice and utilising the scientist-practitioner approach. To the best of our knowledge and besides ourselves, we do not know of any life coaches or life coaching agencies in New Zealand that base their practices solely on empirically validated theories, therapies and techniques.

Secondly, we would also like to see life coaching become more accessible to a wider range of the population. The media portray life coaching as a ‘middle-to-upper class’ phenomenon, and from our experience, and given the fees that most life coaches charge, this is largely accurate. However, this need not be the case. We see life coaching, both in New Zealand and overseas, as broadening its reach in the future into other domains, for example, coaching with children and adolescences, with indigenous peoples, and with underprivileged groups. Specific life coaching niches are already starting to spring up, such as relationship coaching, parenting coaching, teen coaching, health coaching, career coaching, business coaching, corporate coaching, and executive coaching.

Life coaching is receiving increasing public awareness and attention, and the day will come (shortly we think) when life coaching will reach a critical mass in society, where people will have heard of life coaching, know when they need a life coach, know how to find a life coach, and know the difference between partnering with a life coach versus seeking the services of a clinical psychologist or counselor. More people are taking the steps to turn their dreams into reality and achieve excellence in living, and now that change is the norm, society seems hungry for life coaches. In our opinion, many of the ‘problems in living’ that people seek the help of a clinical psychologist for are perhaps better served by life coaches, avoiding the stigma of therapy altogether and freeing up valuable mental health resources.

Although we realise that life coaching is certainly not for every psychologist, the question we would like to leave you with is: “*what do I want my future as a helping professional to look like and is life coaching right for me?*”

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