What is Coaching Psychology?

Coaching psychology is a distinct branch of academic and applied psychology that focuses on the enhancement of performance, development, and well-being in both work and personal domains through the application of coaching models that are grounded in psychological theories, methods and approaches (Grant, 2006; Grant & Cavanagh, 2007; Palmer & Whybrow, 2005). While the application of psychology to coaching can be traced back as early as the 1920s and 1950s (e.g. Griffith, 1926; Miller, 1927; Lawther, 1951), the contemporary field of coaching psychology as a distinct sub-discipline of psychology is a relatively recent tradition that formally emerged in Australia and the United Kingdom at the turn of the twenty-first century.

What is a Coaching Psychologist?

A Coaching Psychologist is essentially a psychologist who works with others to support the enhancement of performance, development, and well-being using psychology-informed coaching approaches. It should be noted that 'Coaching Psychologist' is not a restricted or legally protected title, and so the term may be used, applied, or interpreted differently by different people or practitioners. Indeed, the British Psychological Society’s Special Group in Coaching Psychology (SGCP) leaves the use of the term “…to the discretion of individual members” (SGCP Website, August 2012), with the caveat that psychologists using the title or laying claim to specialist expertise in coaching psychology should have regard to the BPS’s general guidelines on competence and ethical practice (BPS, 2009).

Which Psychological Approaches Inform Coaching?

The psychological approaches drawn upon will depend on the orientation of the specific practitioner. The Handbook of Coaching Psychology (Palmer & Whybrow, 2007) provides a broad overview of a number of approaches that can inform coaching practice, and reflects the need for coaching psychologists to be able to draw upon a diverse range of methods to meet the needs of their clients. My own practice is influenced by the following:
Person-Centred Approaches
(Carl Rogers, 1951, 1961). People have an inherent tendency to grow and develop, and this potential is released in a social environment where the person feels understood, valued and accepted. Rogers postulated the three ‘core conditions’ a therapist needs to provide for change to occur – unconditional positive regard, genuineness, and empathic understanding.

Cognitive-Behavioural Psychology
A person’s feelings about a situation are not caused by the event itself, but rather their thoughts and interpretations about the event (Beck, 1967, 1976; Ellis, 1962). Individuals can experience ‘thinking errors’ that can distort their interpretation of reality and impact negatively on both feelings and behaviour. Thinking errors can be transformed into more adaptive thoughts through the process of disputation and the application of thinking skills (see e.g. Greenberger & Padesky, 1995; Ellis, 1988; Beck, 2011).

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy
Understanding the origin or cause of a problem is not necessary to start building a solution. Clients bring with them valuable resources that can be harnessed as they move towards their preferred future (De Shazer, 1985, 1988; Berg & De Jong, 2000).

Motivational Interviewing
A way of being with and communicating with people that elicits their own intrinsic motivation to change, underpinned by principles of collaboration, evocation, and autonomy (Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

Non-violent communication
Provides a language of emotions and core universal needs within a framework for communication that can be applied to developing greater self-awareness, expressing one’s own needs without violating the needs of others, and receiving others empathically (Rosenberg, 2003).

Self-Determination Theory
Social environments can either facilitate or forestall human potential according to the extent they satisfy the core needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to SDT, individuals who experience their behaviour as self-determined in contexts where these needs are satisfied will demonstrate enhanced intrinsic motivation, performance, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Positive Psychology
Rather than exploring the psychology of dysfunction or how to ameliorate distress, positive psychology focuses on the conditions in which people perform optimally and experience greater well-being. Areas of exploration include the value of positive emotion, interventions for improving happiness and well-being, identifying and utilizing strengths, building resilience, and developing positive interpersonal relationships (see e.g. Seligman, 2003).

Links and Further Reading

Websites

British Psychological Society Special Group in Coaching Psychology
The SGCP provides the ‘home’ within the BPS for those interested in coaching...
psychology, and produces the journal *The Coaching Psychologist*. It takes an inclusive approach, with membership also open to non-psychologists who are interested in the field.

www.sgcp.org.uk

*International Society for Coaching Psychology*
An international society that provides an accreditation route for Coaching Psychologists and produces the journal *Coaching Psychology International*.

www.isfcp.net

*Centre for Coaching*
London-based training centre providing courses in coaching, coaching psychology, and its applications.

www.centreforcoaching.com

*Coaching Psychology Congress*  
Promotes the development of coaching psychology around the world. Also contains information about/links to the various coaching psychology professional bodies in different countries.

www.coachingpsychologycongress.org

**Books and journals**


*The Coaching Psychologist* was first published in hardcopy by the BPS SGCP in July 2005, while the Australian IGCP and the SGCP have collaborated to publish *International Coaching Psychology Review* since April 2006. Both journals continue to be published bi-annually, supporting evidence-based practice in the field of coaching and coaching psychology and providing a forum for Coaching Psychologists to share their learning and findings through peer-reviewed publications. They can be obtained from the [BPS Shop](https://www.bps.org.uk/shop) (downloadable for free if you are a member of the SGCP).

**References**


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