

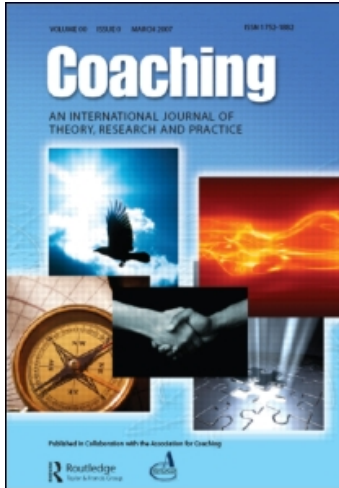
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The primacy of positivity - applications in a coaching context

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The primacy of positivity – applications in a coaching context

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Coaches generally assume that their clients will be happy after they've achieved their goals, which is not an unreasonable assumption, and which is a belief shared by the majority of clients. It may not, however, be helpful as it will be argued in this paper that such an approach may well contribute to a phenomenon labelled as the 'tyranny of when' and also to a range of problems including negative, self-defeating emotions such as frustration. As an alternative, the author proposes that rather than waiting until success is achieved, happiness and positivity should come first and foremost. By promoting the 'primacy of positivity' coaches can help their clients' achieve their goals by capitalising on the significant findings of Fredrickson, Lyubomirsky and others and by leveraging off the energy and motivation created.

Keywords: coaching; positivity; positive psychology; happiness

Introduction: the primacy of positivity

There is a valid debate taking place within positive psychology circles questioning the definitions of, and the relationship between positive psychology and happiness. Seligman (2002), for example, makes it clear that authentic happiness is much more than the experience of positive emotions, noting that (among other things) it also involves connectedness, engagement, meaning and purpose. Fredrickson (2009) decided not to even include happiness in her top 10 list of positive emotions because she considered happiness to be a term too vague with many meanings defined differently by many people. Others have expressed concerns that the new science of positive psychology will be mistaken for some sort of ambiguous or unhelpfully populist 'happy-ology' (e.g. Peterson & Park, 2010).

As valuable and necessary as these discussions are, it is important not to ignore or to underestimate the potentially constructive role that happiness and positive emotions might play in a range of contexts, including coaching. This article hypothesises that the utilisation of 'the primacy of positivity', via happiness and other positive emotions, may enhance the ease with which we achieve success and productivity in our lives. Further, happiness and other positive emotions may also enhance the ease with which coaches can help their clients achieve their goals and progress effectively.

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Overcoming the first obstacle – ‘the tyranny of when’

Most clients working with clinicians and coaches are trying, in some way or other, to find happiness and other forms of success. Happiness might be a primary goal, but it might also be a secondary goal or not even an overtly stated goal at all. Regardless, this paper argues that the appropriate use of happiness and positive emotions will be beneficial for all involved as almost all of these clients will come up against challenges to the achievement of their goals that the author has come to call ‘the tyranny of when’. This is similar to Hamilton’s (2004) construct of ‘deferred happiness’, a premise that brought to light the tendency of people to sacrifice quality of life in order to stay in negative (but frequently well paying) workplace settings.

To further explain this term, ‘the tyranny of when’ is the phenomenon experienced by many coaching clients, resulting from a group of related thoughts and beliefs associated with imagined and seemingly desirable, but currently unreachd goals. For example: ‘I’ll be happy when . . . when I have more money, when I have a bigger house, or when I have a better job’. As suggested by Oishi, Diener and Lucas (2007) whether overtly stated, conscious or otherwise, most people value happiness above and beyond other desired and desirable outcomes.

This is not to argue that goal setting is inherently wrong or bad, nor that happiness is the only real goal. Sheldon and Houser-Marko (2001) argue that appropriate goal setting is one of the strategies that can lead to happiness and satisfaction; positive outcomes that can be achieved through developing goals that match a client’s implicit interests and that are congruent with the individuals core values.

The problem for many people, however, is that they never get there. If they do reach this satisfaction, they often think of something else that they ‘need’ before they can feel happy (thus, the ultimate ‘tyranny of when’). In recent years, positive psychologists have come to refer to this as the ‘hedonic treadmill’, a metaphor in which an individual is constantly running, but never reaching a destination. In other words, happiness is thought to be fleeting and influenced positively and negatively by events, but people will inevitably revert back to ‘neutral’ (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006, p. 305). As a result, individuals do not experience the level of joy or satisfaction desired.

These less than ideal definitions of happiness parallel popular Western ideas of success that are based in the thought: ‘if you work hard you’ll achieve your goals, and if you achieve your goals you’ll then be happy’. Quinn and Quinn (2009) argue that this is not always true. It depends more, they argue, on the nature of a person’s goals and specifically, on whether those goals are congruent with values that are purposeful, freely chosen and importantly, uplifting. So once more, goals are by no means implicitly bad but according to Quinn and Quinn (2009) they can be problematic if they include negative and unhelpful expectations or beliefs.

Providing another perspective, Wilson and Gilbert (2005) investigated affective forecasting, which suggests that people’s ability to predict how they’ll feel and cope in the future is relatively poor. This theory includes their ability to make positive changes in or to their life. People tend to overestimate, for example, how difficult it will be to achieve a goal relevant to the coaching process and in turn, will be disrupted or possibly demoralised and demotivated by the experience of ‘negative emotions’ early in the process. If this overestimation of the difficulty of goals is not addressed, the attempt to make positive change will possibly become depleted.

With an intention to help more people (including coaches and their clients) find happiness and success, this article proposes a new approach to coaching, one that can also be extended to life more generally. This approach challenges the tradition of solely and primarily working towards goals in order to experience happiness, and instead argues that achievement and success are far more likely to be met if happiness and positivity are created first. So even if happiness is not an explicit goal in and of itself, it should still be seen as a highly useful means to a desired end.

Broaden and build theory

Notably, there is a growing body of related research that strongly supports the trial of such an approach. This article draws especially on the research of Fredrickson (2001) and particularly, the broaden and build theory of positive emotions.

Until relatively recently, psychology and psychological researchers have traditionally (and almost exclusively) focused on negative emotions. As a result, much is known about how these emotions impact our behaviour and overall mental state. In short, when we experience negative emotions (such as fear or anxiety) we close up. We tend to withdraw and thus not cope as well (Frijda, Kuipers & Schure, 1989). In contrast, the broaden and build theory has evolved out of the investigation of positive emotions and the discovery that these lead to improved performance, more effective coping and resilience, via the broadening of cognitive processes and increased capacity to build on previous experiences (e.g. Fredrickson and Losada, 2005).

Support also comes from Lyubomirsky, King and Diener (2005) who reviewed a number of relevant studies and concluded that:

happiness is associated with and precedes numerous successful outcomes, as well as behaviours paralleling success. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that positive affect – the hallmark of well-being – may be the cause of many of the desirable characteristics, resources, and successes correlated with happiness. (p. 803)

Although the authors of this landmark study were not specifically referring to a coaching context, their conclusions are considered highly relevant for this discussion as the range and breadth of outcomes found to be associated with positive affect are impressive (e.g. health, positive relationships, innovation and creativity, to name but a few).

These research findings of Fredrickson and others (which are by no means exhaustive or comprehensive) indicate that positive emotions help us enjoy the good times, but they also help us cope with the tough times and persevere to achieve meaningful goals (and further, it should be noted, that according to Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) it's more than likely to be the frequency of positive emotions that's important as opposed to the intensity). As a result, positive emotions are not simply a phenomenon we should enjoy after we have achieved something of significance, but they are also tools we can use to increase our chances of achieving significant outcomes. Rather than succumbing to 'the tyranny of when', we can utilise 'the power of then'. This refers to the idea that if happiness and positivity are created first, then the chances of achieving desirable goals are significantly enhanced.

Through this theory, the wonders of positive emotions can be experienced before, during and after success, rather than (as we often imagine) just after.

Implications for coaching

So what does this mean for coaching and potentially, for other forms of intervention including clinical psychology and even workplace change management programs? The process of coaching, and the task of helping others achieve real change and meaningful goals, could be enhanced via application of tools derived from and based on this concept of the 'primacy of positivity'.

According to Kemp (2008), coaching involves a collaborative working alliance in which the coach and coachee set mutually defined goals and devise specific steps leading to goal attainment. Grant, Curtayne, and Burton (2009) similarly note that regardless of theoretical orientation, coaching includes principles such as accountability, awareness raising, responsibility, commitment, action planning and action.

If these are the ultimate goals of coaching (and also of therapy and any other 'change processes'), it is reasonable to ask whether attainment is easier if the client was helped to experience some appropriate form of happiness or positive emotion. This would increase motivation and innovation, which stimulates creativity and problem solving and drives more helpful and constructive behaviours. Research related to Fredrickson's broaden and build theory clearly suggests that positive emotions enhance creativity, innovation and problem solving (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005), as well as improving team-work, collaboration and relationships (e.g. Quinn, 2007; Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006).

Case study

M first presented as a 29 year old, single and unemployed female. She presented for assistance with problems associated with a 20 year history of chronic fatigue syndrome. She described a history in which she missed significant amounts of schooling and accordingly, many opportunities for socialising and for forming relationships. Not surprisingly, therefore, as well as describing relatively high levels of dysfunction, low mood and a range of difficulties associated with low energy levels she also described feeling isolated and unfulfilled (having never, despite appearing to be quite intelligent, completed high school or achieved her goals of attending university). Her scores on the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale were all in the top range.

Just as, if not more, relevant however, were initial observations of her hopelessness and helplessness. Having attended literally hundreds of consultations with a range of health professionals over the years (from traditional medical specialists through to more alternative practitioners of acupuncture and homeopathy, and everything in between) she had essentially been told, repeatedly and consistently, that she was sick and that there was not much anyone could do about it. The most hopeful message she'd ever received was that if she could manage herself and her illness then she might be able to reduce the intensity and/or duration of the bad periods.

As a practitioner, it seemed clear that to develop a strong and positive relationship with M, and to engage her in the coaching process, it would be necessary to overcome the negativity and pessimism that seemed to pervade every other assessment and intervention she had attended: it seemed vitally important to build some hope given that

everyone else she'd ever seen had systematically (although probably unwittingly) destroyed her hope. The idea that she might enjoy a better quality of life after she'd got better was patently absurd to her as she saw little, if any chance of getting better (because that's what she'd been told by all the experts).

Immediately, therefore, the focus of coaching was on finding positives upon which some motivation could be built. She was asked to reflect, for example, on what strengths had helped her survive and persist over the years; previously, no one had ever suggested she might have strengths or that she might have been resilient. M was also encouraged to focus on what she had achieved despite her difficulties; all other practitioners had focused on what she hadn't achieved and how she felt about these failures and disappointments. Further, a not insignificant proportion of the early sessions were spent discussing literature, something M clearly loved and something that, through her reading and writing, had kept her going through the difficult times. Such discussions contributed both to building a positive connection and relationship and also to boosting her energy and motivation via a focus on pleasurable and satisfying activities as opposed to draining or difficult ones.

In short, therefore, the early stages of coaching focused little on goal setting but rather, on finding common interests, building a positive relationship, highlighting positive achievements and experiences in the past and highlighting that all was not as bleak and desperate as it might have seemed. Unfortunately, no one else had ever taken such an approach, but fortunately, it began to have an effect via the generation of positive emotions, positive memories and importantly, a degree of hope and optimism.

Building on this M was then helped to identify her strengths (using the VIA Survey) and subsequently, to build on these strengths to begin to conceptualise and to create a better future. The focus of coaching was not primarily on treating the fatigue (as all other efforts had been) but instead, on engaging in helpful and constructive behaviours despite ongoing difficulties. M was also helped to clarify what was meaningful for her as well as to reconnect with old friends and to build new connections, neither of which she'd felt she was able (or been encouraged) to contemplate.

In short then, M made significant progress within a relatively short period of time. Within 10 sessions she was reporting significant improvements in terms of mood (something that was clear and obvious within sessions but also reinforced through her significantly improved DASS scores), social activities, family relations and notably, productive work. One thing M had tried to maintain over the years was her writing and she had, to her credit, successfully submitted a number of opinion pieces and book reviews for consideration in well-regarded publications such as the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age. Over the last 10 years or so, however, she'd had only a handful of articles published whereas, in the first year following commencement of coaching, she was being published on a regular, monthly basis and she'd re-written and completed a draft of her novel. What was particularly noticeable was the pattern that improved mood lead to improved functioning, which lead to further improvements in mood and function.

Based on the aforementioned research findings, as well as this brief case study, it is proposed that rather than approaching clients with the attitude that they need to achieve and to succeed before experiencing happiness (which could possibly be communicated to clients via overtly verbal but also via more subtle, non-verbal means), it is suggested that coaches find ways to boost positive emotions and to create positive experiences first and foremost for their clients. It's hypothesised that such an

approach will subsequently assist them to engage in constructive and helpful behaviours that will ultimately lead them towards real success (however defined).

Although future research will be needed to explore the efficacy of specific positivity boosting strategies in a variety of coaching contexts, the author believes there is already valid and reliable evidence for the effectiveness of certain strategies in a number of situations.

Gostick and Christopher (2008) and Avolio, Howell and Sosik (1999) both put forward strong arguments for the appropriate use of 'levity' in an organisational context, citing a range of studies linking positive work environments to levels of engagement, reduced turnover, enhanced productivity and company profitability. Consistent with this premise, Buckingham and Clifton (2001) argue that helping employees identify and utilise their strengths is associated with lower turnover, more productivity and higher customer satisfaction scores (further support comes from Peterson, 2006).

Based on the related work of Gostick and Christopher (2008), Rath and Clifton (2004), as well as Lyubomirsky (2008) and others, I propose some examples of how one can create and enhance positivity in the early stages of coaching with a view to increase the chances of client achievement (and please note, this is by no means a comprehensive list) (Sharp, 2008):

- Actively and explicitly focus on positive experiences within the client's life, present and past (see the work on savouringby, for example, Bryant & Veroff, 2005).
- Quickly work towards helping the client identify his or her strengths (using tools such as the VIA Survey). Specifically look for expressions of these strengths in past experiences and discuss how best to utilise these in future situations.
- Build a positive coaching relationship by finding common areas of interest or leisure activities.
- Have fun and use humour appropriately (coaching is far too important to take too seriously!).
- Make clients feel special and do what you can to make them believe that the process of coaching is and will be a positive one; and note that this begins before they even enter your consulting room or pick up the phone.
- Add value to your client and to the coaching process by considering and offering anything and everything you can to help your client in every aspect of his/her life (looking beyond the specific nature of the presenting problem or even the collaboratively defined goal).
- Provide plenty of positive reinforcement each time your client achieves something of significance, regardless of the size, or even when positive experiences from the past are recalled or mentioned.
- Cultivate hope and optimism at every opportunity by reminding the client of previous successes and achievements and by appropriately noting how these experiences can be used to build more positivity in the future.
- Encourage the doing of good deeds to and for others (e.g. Post and Neimark, 2008).
- Finally, provide instruction in evidence-based mindfulness and meditation methods (e.g. Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, and Finkel, 2008).

In conclusion, it's worth noting that as a theoretical paper, the ideas expressed in this article need to be tested empirically. It's also worth noting, just briefly and in order to address the concern that the pursuit of positive emotions may lead to selfishness rather than authentic happiness, that findings from social psychology indicate that those who experience positive emotions also have a positive effect on others via social and emotional contagion. That is, when we feel good we're more likely to make others feel good (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993).

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Prof. Timothy Sharp has three degrees in psychology (including a Masters Degree in Clinical Psychology and a Ph.D.). He has an impressive record as an academic, clinician and coach. He runs one of Sydney's oldest and most respected clinical psychology practices, a highly regarded Executive Coaching practice, and is the founder, and Chief Happiness Officer of Australia's first organisation devoted solely to promoting the principles of positive psychology in individuals, families and organisations (The Happiness Institute). Prof. Sharp has taught at all the major universities in NSW and is currently an Adjunct Professor (in Positive Psychology) within the School of Management, Faculty of Business at UTS and also an Adjunct Professor (Positive Psychology) within the School of Health Sciences at RMIT University. His primary area of interest is promoting the principles of positive psychology at work and within organisations (which includes coping positively with change, developing practical optimism and resilience, as well as identifying and effectively utilising signature strengths within individuals, teams and organisations). Finally, Prof. Sharp is a bestselling author, a highly sought after public speaker, and he makes frequent appearances in the local and international media where he has, over the years, been read and heard by literally millions of people around the world.