

LIFE COACHING AND WELL-BEING

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I PRACTICE AS A LIFE-COACH WITH A SPECIALISM IN HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING WHICH MEANS WORKING WITH INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS ON THEIR OUTER, CIRCUMSTANTIAL HAPPINESS AND THEIR INNER, COGNITIVE HAPPINESS. But a life-coach, unlike a mentor, doesn't set the agenda so this work on happiness may just be the undercurrent beneath a life change or search for new career or some development around relationships. My favourite metaphor for my role is that of a wilderness guide: I and the client are surrounded by 360° of mountains and countryside. They choose their long-term direction, their medium-term goal and their short-term actions (the mountain, the base camp and the next step) and I help them through the ups and downs of the territory. The work on happiness is more part of the journey than the destination. The hardest part of my role is to remain non-directive but with experience I don't find that it is long before I hear a question that could just take the journey further towards God's kingdom. The hardest part for the client is trusting themselves and the process enough to express their real ultimate ambition.

My work with (mostly non-Christian) clients often includes some form of spiritual direction which they only choose as an avenue to explore when other options don't show fruit. Spiritual hunger is common but because of the discipline involved (no quick fixes and no easy answers) someone has to be hungry enough to really want it. Incidentally, I think the two missing ingredients from the spiritual search that aren't found in the body, mind and spirit section of the bookshops are community and discipline, and people are getting hungry enough to search for both which is where Christian groups can help.

The other hallmarks of life-coaching are generally that it is a short, fixed-term relationship that is defined by getting to a medium-term goal. There are generally six to twelve sessions over a three to six month period. The most common presenting state is for a client to say, 'I'm not really very happy with my current situation but I don't really know what I want instead.' The work may be about quantitative or qualitative changes. It may be about practical issues like time management (almost a universal for the clergy I work with) or emotional issues like low self-esteem but the defining emphasis must be on working primarily towards realising solutions whilst secondly exploring the cognitive frameworks which might be exacerbating the problems.

I work with the subject of well-being and happiness as a niche because it is universal; 'happiness' being the 'sole

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NOTES

1. Unrefined subjective happiness is about comparisons to others (Q1, 2 silver compares up, bronze down) having a sense of control (3), bad things having more effect than good things (7), security and commitment (12), normalising to novelty (15), and happy endings (9 yes, this was a real experiment). Proactive developing happiness is about changing subjective outlook (4), making do (11), developing self-understanding and balance (8, 13) and community working at the two greatest commandments (5, 8, 10, 13, 14).

FURTHER READING

Martin, C, *The Life Coaching Handbook: Everything You Need to Be an Effective Life Coach* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing (2001))
 Starr, J, *The Coaching Manual: The Definitive Guide to the Process and Skills of Personal Coaching* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Business, 2003)
 Seligman, MEP, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realise Your Potential for Lasting Fulfilment* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2002)
 Layard, R, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (London: Penguin, 2005)

► end of man' according to too many philosophers to mention. The findings of positive psychology show that happiness starts as a search for subjective pleasure but is surpassed by a search for external (and often transcendental) meaning. For those with a long biblical view that might cause a wry smile and hopefully ignite real hope for growth. Positive psychology research is also helping to take the subjectivity out of 'well-being'. The findings should offer some encouragement to those already in a position to help. In these comparisons, which are happier, A's or B's or no difference?

1. Worker A earns £75,000 a year with neighbours who earn £100,000. Worker B earns £40,000 a year with neighbours who earn £30,000?
2. Athlete A wins the silver medal. Athlete B wins the bronze medal.
3. County A holds few referendums. County B holds many referendums.
4. Person A writes about five things that happened today. Person B writes about five things to give gratitude for today.
5. Country A has a lower fraction of it's population who believe in God. Country B has a higher fraction of its population who believe in God.
6. Person A watches TV more than person B.
7. Person A wins £200 then loses £100. Person B wins £100 then loses £40.
8. Group A doesn't meditate. Group B does meditate.
9. Patient A has an uncomfortable 20 minute colonoscopy. Patient B has a 21 minute uncomfortable colonoscopy with the probe kept motionless for the last minute.
10. Person A does well. Person B does good.
11. Shopper A finds the item that suits in the most maximising way, 'I must find the comparatively best.' Shopper B finds the item that suits in the most satisfying way, 'This one will do'.
12. Couple A are cohabiting. Couple B are married.
13. Person A works on their outer life to improve happiness. Person B works on their inner life to improve happiness.
14. Person A isn't part of a faith community. Person B is part of a faith community.

15. Employee A's wages are mostly bonus and incentive based whilst B's are a fixed salary.

In all cases, B's are happier than A's and questions 4, 8, 10 and 14 have the biggest impact on happiness.¹ Some of the above are offered as food for thought but some have a direct bearing on the Church and it's mission; the research is mirroring Christian values. The challenge is to make the links with people asking the questions.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF LIFE COACHING? HOW DOES IT HELP?

I was sceptical at first about life-coaching but I am hugely thankful for being led in this direction because of the benefits I have seen in clients lives. Making any change is difficult and happens outside our comfort zones, which is often why change chooses us. Having continual, impartial, unconditional support through this time has obvious benefits and ensures that improvements have a real chance of embedding. A brilliant and inspirational new idea from a book or retreat or trying to change a habit takes more time that we've got motivation for but the life-coach is there over the period to help when the going gets tough. The life-coach can also provide perspective to sort out the clash between what the client wants behaviourally and their conflicting values. And a skilled non-directive life-coach will leave the client feeling super-powered knowing that they did it themselves!

This is an oversimplification, but one weakness in the general life-coaching and positive psychology view – than you are what you think and positive thought wins through – is rarely challenged even though the evidence of research highlights that we are more than mind. A client may believe that happiness will only come as a result of various changes in their circumstances and actions; they may have, say, 45 per cent happiness and in three months time raise that by as much as 8 per cent. (At least this is better than measuring their weakness which is positive psychology's criticism of traditional psychology which might raise that from -8 unhappy to -3). But without mention of soul and spirit in the model it is a bit like rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic. I make it clear to clients from the start that working on two fronts, inner and outer purpose or ego and awareness or even manifested and unmanifested, if that is their language, is a more balanced way forward.

The most liberating realisation is that we already have happiness (or wisdom, beauty, love or confidence) within us: we already have the total amount. The job is to uncover it by losing some ideas rather than get

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something more. The view most people have is that they are starting with an empty account and happiness will only come as a result of circumstantial gain. We should ask ourselves when we are at our happiest, what's been taken away, rather than asking what's been added.

INTERVENTIONS

These are some exercises that you can give to individuals or groups that help develop well-being and happiness. You could even try them yourself.

1. *Giving thanks:* At the end of each day write about three to five things you feel thankful or grateful for. Keep this up for three weeks to see real benefits.

2. *360° Review:* Write a paragraph about the thoughts and feelings you have about yourself in the following areas:

- How happy am I generally?
- What might help me be happier?
- What activities do I do that enable me to be my happiest?
- What role am I in when I am at my happiest?
- Which relationships bring out my happy side?
- What is wrong or missing when I am unhappy?

And also get two or more others, who will give balanced and objective opinions, to write their answers to the same questions about you. This gives you a more thorough and rounded appraisal of your happiness and some ideas for development.

3. *Thank-you letter:* Think of someone who has made a positive impact on your life. Someone who has had a beneficial influence who you may not have thanked properly. Compose a letter to this person expressing how you feel. Next, make contact with this person and arrange a meeting and read out loud what you have written. Don't tell them in advance what the meeting is for and when you have finished allow them time to respond. This is a good group project as the stories of the encounters can be shared later.

4. *Focus on what you can do:* When your thoughts about the future are scattered or worrying you, a good question to focus on is: what *can* I do? Think about what the first step is towards the future you are hoping for. Focus on what you can do right now.

5. *Numeric goals:* A brilliant way to get through difficult projects with a greater sense of happiness is to break them down into measurable numeric tasks. For example, if you have a pile of tasks to do – such as

replying to emails, letters to write or cleaning – turn them into numeric goals. Get ten done before lunch or fill these three boxes by the end of the day. Don't forget to reward yourself somehow!

6. *Flow:* Make tasks in your life satisfy as many of the following criteria as possible and you will find them enabling a state called 'flow'. This can only happen in the present moment and gradually develops psychological and emotional strength.

- The task is challenging but suits your skill level.
- You concentrate.
- There are clear goals.
- You get immediate feedback.
- You are deeply involved.
- You have a sense of control.
- Your sense of self vanishes.
- Time seems to stop.

7. *Awareness disputation:* If you find yourself captured by automatic negative thoughts ask yourself the following series of questions which aren't designed to oppose the thought but rather to accept it knowing that it is in you but not you: Where does this thought, feeling or idea come from? Does this thought, feeling or idea create well-being or suffering? What is the true nature and consequence of this thought, feeling or idea? Is this thought, feeling or idea all that I am?

8. *Stillness:* The ability to sustain this non-judgemental observation comes from practising stillness. Find a spot free from distraction and sit in a position where you won't drop off and gently bring your attention to the feeling of your breath or the sounds you can hear. If you are distracted come back to the anchor you have chosen. You can also repeat the words 'be still and know, the peace of God' slowly in time with your breathing.

9. *Strengths and meaning:* Take the test on this site: www.viastrengths.org to discover your strengths. Think carefully about how you are living and how you can use more of these strengths in more of your life. Living a meaningful life is a combination of three things: having a focus bigger than yourself, taking actions towards that focus and using your strengths.

10. *Volunteer:* A new creative twist on volunteering is the pledge bank. The idea is that someone promises to take some sort of action but only if others join them. So you can either join others in changing the world or suggest your own ideas (www.pledgebank.com). ■