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What is Life Coaching?

Life coaching is coaching that focuses on improving people's personal lives as well as their working lives. Though a relatively recent phenomenon, it is undoubtedly here to stay. In the USA, since the mid-1990s, there has been a huge increase in attention to life coaching. In 1996 the International Coach Federation (ICF), founded in 1992, had its first convention in the USA. Life coaching is spreading worldwide, including to Britain and Australia. For instance, in 2002, the Association for Coaching was established in Britain and in 2005 the British Psychological Society set up a Coaching Psychology Section. Also in 2002, the Interest Group Coaching Psychology (IGCP) was established in the Australian Psychological Society.

Defining Life Coaching

Even in the USA, the profession of coaching is not known clearly by the public. Prior (2003), who was co-Chair of the ICF Ethics and Standards Committee, writes that, more often than not, coaching is incorrectly understood by an unknowing public to be a virtual version of modern therapy. Currently the profession of life coaching is in its early days. Thus, while there are definitions of life coaching, none has become firmly established as a widely accepted definition of the field. Dictionary definitions of coaching emphasize words like instruction and training. Thus, a coach instructs or trains another person, whom I shall call the client, about how to lead their life.

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Ways of defining life coaching include the following. Grant and Palmer (2002) state that coaching psychology is for enhancing well-being and performance in personal life and work domains with normal, non-clinical populations. The IGCP (2005: 2) of the Australian Psychological Society states that coaching psychology is 'the systematic application of behavioural science to the enhancement of life experience, work performance and well-being for individuals, groups and organizations who do not have significant mental health issues or abnormal levels of stress'. Downey (2003: 21) states that, 'Coaching is the art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another'. Finally, Auerbach (2001: 10) states, 'Personal coaching involves helping generally well-functioning people create and achieve goals, maximize personal development, and navigate transitions on the path to realizing their ideal vision for the current and emerging chapters of their lives.' A definition of life coaching as used in this book is provided at the end of the chapter when the reasons for it should be clearer to the reader.

Dimensions of Life

Let's look at some of the elements of defining life coaching. First, take the word 'life'. This leads into the area of *whose* life. As may be gleaned from the preceding paragraph, the main focus of life coaching is on the lives of ordinary people of all ages. Life coaching can also include a focus on superior functioning. However, even though some therapeutic approaches contain coaching, words like 'therapy' and 'counselling' best describe the services that such less well-functioning clients need.

Another area of meaning for 'life', in terms of our definition, is that coaching can go on for life. This is a position advocated by some life coaches, for instance Williams and Davis (2002). The coach is available on an ongoing basis to assist clients to lead the most satisfying, significant and successful lives that they can. Another way of looking at life is that coaching can take place at various stages of it. For instance, relationship coaching can strengthen people's ability to have good relationships at different stages, such as the initial learning of relationship skills, pre-marital coaching, marital and family coaching, and living a retired life.

Still another way of looking at life in terms of life coaching is that coaching can concern different aspects of it. Williams and Davis (2002) propose that what they term 'total life coaching' covers all areas of life. These areas are career/life purpose, family and friends, finances, romance/intimacy, health/self care, social/fun, personal/spiritual development and physical environment.

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Mulligan (1999) lists seven major areas: health, spiritual/religious life, work and career, finances, personal relationships, family/extended family and friends/social life. Though there is some overlap between the areas, coaching of clients may take place in any or all of them. Other areas for coaching include coaching tailored to women or men, creativity coaching, and retirement coaching (Wigman, 2005).

Related to coaching for different aspects of life is the notion of coaching for skills or for life skills. For instance, health skills can cover keeping fit skills, managing weight skills and managing stress skills, among others. Career skills can include those for choosing a career, handling various aspects of the work environment, changing jobs or even areas of work, as well as pre-retirement and retirement skills. Furthermore, maximizing enjoyment of leisure can also be included. There are numerous personal relationship skills including listening and showing understanding skills, assertiveness skills, managing anger and conflict skills, and sexual relationship skills. Each of the broad areas of skills cited by Williams and Davis and Mulligan above can be broken down into different life skills.

Yet another way of looking at life in this context is to consider what constitutes a life skill. There are two main areas of sub-skill for every life skill, namely mind skills, and communication/action skills. For example, being assertive is a skill that is useful in numerous situations. However assertiveness consists of mind skills, such as the ability to perceive accurately, to have realistic personal rules and to engage in appropriate self-talk. Assertiveness also involves sending overt messages of appropriate verbal, vocal and bodily communication. The position taken in this book is that, while it is possible to coach people without overtly using the concept of skills, it is often of great advantage to get people thinking in terms of the mind skills and communication/action skills that make up the life skills they require both for specific situations and for life in general.

The reader may be wondering about feelings and physical reactions. These are regarded as part of genetic human nature. As such, they are not skills but are capable of being influenced by how well a person uses mind skills and communication/action skills. For instance, when being assertive such skills can be used to experience feelings fully and to manage them appropriately.

Dimensions of Life Coaching

What does coaching a person to lead a more fulfilled life involve? To put it simply there is a coach, a client, the process of coaching and then what the

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client does on her or his own when not in contact with, or after contact with, the coach. To date in Britain and Australia, there is no widely recognized professional qualification for life coaches. Consequently, people with varying backgrounds are offering coaching: psychologists, social workers, nurses, teachers, people in industry and lay people, to name but a few. The level of skill of such people varies widely from the highly competent to the incompetent. Probably it is just a matter of time before coaching becomes more professionalized, where those accredited as life coaches will have to undergo training and practice under supervision before they are allowed to coach on their own. In the British and Australian Psychological Societies it is likely that the current interest groups in coaching will develop into professional groups with standards for training and accreditation. Other professions, such as social work and personnel management, may also train and accredit coaches in the future. Inevitably much life coaching will continue to be done informally, by parents, teachers, bosses and so on.

Life coaching clients can be just about anyone. Coaching can take place at virtually all life stages, from the very young to the old preparing for death. At the moment, life coaching tends to be for the relatively affluent few who can afford the fees charged by private coaches. Wigman (2005: 2) writes: 'The hottest propositions for personal coaching seem to be among the cash-rich and time-poor professionals, and among the retired and parents of teenagers.' As more becomes known regarding how to live most effectively at each age, it is likely that there will be an increase in people wanting to improve their lives by being coached.

Ways of offering coaching to the less wealthy will also likely be developed, though how fast this takes place remains an open question. It is possible that educational institutions will provide more life coaching. Offering coaching to young people partly helps society avoid the personal and financial costs of the breakdown of families through people never having learned good life skills. A contributing reason to the likely spread of coaching is that having a life coach does not have the stigma of having psychological problems that is frequently attached to seeing counsellors and psychotherapists.

Questions about the processes of life coaching are difficult to answer from the viewpoint of how life coaching is currently being practised. Coaches come from a range of theoretical backgrounds and some even have little such background. Much of the coaching literature indicates that the writers practise on the basis of what seems to work for them rather than from clear theoretical positions. The approach to coaching taken in this book is based on a combination of cognitive-behavioural and humanistic theory. Behaviour consists of how people think as well as how they act. Cognitive-behaviourism

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holds that behaviour is learned from a mixture of instruction, reward or reinforcement, demonstration or modelling and practise. The consequences of these experiences are that fortunate people are helped to develop the mind skills and the communication skills to lead life effectively whereas less fortunate people are not. Humanistic theory emphasizes the importance of the relationship between coach and client. In many instances, a sound coaching relationship can assist clients by helping them to have the confidence to exhibit and improve behaviours that are already in their repertoires. Coaches need to treat clients as individuals who need different amounts of a warm, non-controlling relationship and a focus on specific skills, depending on their circumstances.

Life coaching can involve helping a person learn a skill for the first time, helping them maintain and improve existing skills and assisting them to weaken and, if possible, stop exhibiting unwanted skills. Coaching can last from a single session to a lifetime. However, those who have regular contact with coaches throughout their lives, partly for financial reasons, are likely to be very much a minority. Many people come to coaching because they are not getting as much out of life as they would like. Often coaching starts by providing them with assistance for a problem and then broadens into helping them live more effectively in other areas. Another approach to coaching is to have it when one feels it necessary. For instance, there may be a major decision or change in one's life with which one would like assistance. Still another approach, especially in business, is to be coached at the request of another person. For instance, a reason that business people get sent for coaching is to help them learn the skills they will require to take up a new position. Another reason is to help them to remedy any skills weaknesses they may have that stop them from making their best contribution to a firm's profitability.

Life coaching can be performed in numerous ways and combinations of ways. A face-to-face meeting has much to recommend it at the start of coaching. This can help build the coach-client relationship as well as give the coach experience of the client's body communication. Other considerations favouring face-to-face meetings are when coaches and clients prefer to work that way, when there is a focus on demonstrating and rehearsing bodily communication, and when clients need personal contact to maintain the relationship – as with some teenage clients, for instance.

The other main method of life coaching is by phone contact. For instance, a coach may initially meet face-to-face with a client and then engage in a phone relationship in which the client phones the coach at a fixed time for a fixed period, commonly 30 minutes. For busy clients, this has the advantage of saving them time. Some skills, for instance mind

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skills, may be taught nearly or just as well over the phone as in person. Furthermore, certain clients appreciate the opportunity to talk by phone over current and emerging issues with skilled coaches on an ongoing basis. E-mail messages are also used, though they have the disadvantage of not being as immediate as face-to-face or phone conversations. In time, with advances in communication technology, it is likely that coaching sessions can be held with coaches and clients seeing one another on screens in their separate locations.

Life coaching can be conducted with individuals, couples, groups and in classrooms. This book focuses mainly on working with individuals, though a chapter on working with groups is included. Life coaching is also a self-help or self-coaching process. A major reason why this book focuses on a life-skills approach to coaching is that, ultimately, clients have to become their own coaches if they are to lead their lives soundly. The aim of all good coaching is effective self-coaching. Where possible, clients should be coached in such a way that they understand the skills well enough that they can monitor their performance and, where necessary, make corrections in how they are thinking and communicating. Life coaching can also take place through reading and working with self-help books and watching self-help videos and CDs. Such self-coaching can take place in conjunction with, or independently of, personal or phone sessions with coaches.

Differences between Counselling, Psychotherapy and Life Coaching

Before suggesting some differences between counselling or psychotherapy and life coaching, I stress that there are many similarities. Both counselling and life coaching aim to help clients lead fulfilled lives. In addition, they leave the client with the right to choose what sort of life they want to lead. Some counselling approaches, in particular the cognitive and cognitive-behavioural approaches, contain a large coaching element within them. Though they do not emphasize the word skills, approaches like rational emotive behaviour therapy and cognitive therapy aim to teach and coach clients in key mind skills and, to a lesser extent, in communication skills so that they can deal better with the problems for which they came to counselling. Life coaches can gain much from being familiar with theories of counselling and therapy (Corsini and Wedding, 2005; Nelson-Jones, 2006a).

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Now let's look at some ways that life coaching differs from conventional counselling and therapy. The goals of life coaching are both positive and stated in the positive. There is an assumption of seeking mental wellness rather than overcoming mental illness. Though an exaggeration, there is some truth in Peltier's comment: 'High performance athletes are coached; sick, weak or crazy people get therapy' (Peltier, 2001: *xix*). Life coaching is not geared towards those whose problems are best described by the latest version of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Such people require psychotherapy. Coaching clients are not worked with in psychiatric hospitals. Often very competent people seek life coaching; they want to be even more effective in leading their lives. Normal people also seek life coaching to maximize aspects of their potential and get more out of life. Life coaching does this by bringing psychological knowledge to address everyday issues and problems such as relationships, health, career, finances and spiritual concerns, among others.

Though there is some overlap, the clients for life coaching differ from those for counselling and therapy. Clients come for counselling very often because they are suffering and in psychological pain. They want to feel, think and act at a level that they regard as normal for the society of which they are a part. At the very least, they want to stop continually feeling very low. Approximately 10 per cent of the population will need counselling at some stage of their lives. However, even normal people can feel unfulfilled. Clients seek life coaching to gain ways of or skills for becoming even more successful and happier than they already are. Rather than being motivated by pain, they are motivated by gain. Their problems are often more to do with achieving their positive potential than dealing with negative issues. They may realize that, during their upbringing, they were not systematically trained in many of the skills for leading a successful life. In addition, they may want coaching to face new challenges in their lives. There is a vast potential market for life coaching in the 90 per cent or so of people who do not need counselling. In addition, many who have been counselled may later want life coaching to become even happier and more skilled at living.

There are many broader reasons why there is a need for disciplined life coaching. With the increase in economic affluence in the Western world, there does not appear to have been a corresponding increase in overall happiness. For example, the divorce rate in countries like Britain, Australia and the USA is about 50 per cent of first marriages, with many also failing at subsequent marriages. In addition, the increased mobility and time spent at work by both sexes has contributed to a breakdown in traditional support systems, such as the extended family and local church. People are bombarded every day by information that often causes them to question

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how they are living. Arguably, this is a more challenging time in which to live. Not only are the former sources of support in decline, but there is a whole new range of problems with the rapid increase in changes brought about by technological invention. However, there is also a whole new range of opportunities with the increase in psychological knowledge and the possibility of using this knowledge to help not just therapy clients but also the rest of the population to lead happier lives.

Alongside the difference of life coaching goals to those of counselling and therapy, the ways of attaining them also differ. With its main emphasis on working with non-disturbed people, life coaching is less likely to be conducted with a psychodynamic approach. Mutual goals are established quite quickly in life coaching. If anything, life coaching directly encourages and trains clients in how to deal with and improve their present and their futures, rather than to understand their past.

The nature of coaches' relationships with clients also differs from that in counselling. Already I have mentioned that life coaching may be conducted over the phone as well as in person. With coaching clients in general being less disturbed than counselling clients, coaches need spend less time in helping clients listen to themselves. Though good active listening skills are still vital for effective coaching, and though clients are regarded as the main sources of information regarding how to lead their lives, coaches can be more active in making suggestions about areas that require work and what skills clients need to attain in them. The assumption is that so long as the coach is not overbearing, clients are well enough to discuss issues with coaches rather than automatically agree. Though some clients may want to be coached in a person-centred way, many clients are prepared for the coach to take a more active coaching role than that in traditional counselling. Once client and coach settle on objectives, they agree on ways to attain them as quickly as possible. While many counsellors work within an educational approach, coaches can often be seen as emphasizing the training of clients in skills even more than in counselling. Thus the coaching relationship is both facilitative and didactic, the exact mixture between the two depending on the needs of the client at any given moment.

Another issue is that of the language of coaching. Some counselling approaches, such as the person-centred approach, have counsellors conceptualizing clients in a different language to that in which counselling is conducted. Counselling is conducted mainly using the clients' language, and clients do not use person-centred terms like 'self-actualizing' and 'conditions of worth'. Psychodynamic counsellors also do not fully share their language or their approach with clients. In life coaching, coaches use everyday language to describe and train clients in how to become more effective.

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This is a similar attitude to that taken in cognitive-behavioural therapy. However, cognitive-behavioural approaches like rational emotive behaviour therapy and cognitive therapy tend not to focus on a full range of mind skills, and also tend not to use the word skills. As mentioned previously, I think it advantageous to use skills language and to identify the mind skills and communication/action skills that the client requires.

One of the ways coaching can differ from counselling and therapy is that often clients do not mind other people knowing that they are being coached. Many life coaching clients see their coaching as something positive to share with others rather than as a sign of weakness. Sometimes coaches meet with clients in public places, such as cafes or restaurants. Indeed some coaches ask former and sometimes current clients to recommend their services. In the business world, being coached is frequently viewed as a normal activity rather than something unusual or demeaning. Nevertheless, though in some ways the ethics of life coaching differ from counselling, coaches need to be very careful how they behave, for instance in making sure to gain permission before revealing a client's identity.

Life Coaching Defined for this Book

Life coaching has numerous facets and is conducted in many different ways. The definition of life coaching on which the remainder of this book is based is the following:

Life coaching involves coaches using their skills to help generally adequately functioning people learn to improve and maintain their mind skills and communication/action skills and so lead happier, more productive and fulfilled lives. The ultimate aim of life coaching is to help clients become skilled at self-coaching.

This book is primarily about life coaching for individuals in their personal lives rather than about executive, business or performance coaching.