

choice

the magazine of professional coaching

Positive Psychology

What the scientific study of happiness has to offer the coaching world, and vice versa

Integrating Positive Psychology into Your Coaching

The Power & Pitfalls of Positive Thinking

Positive Leadership in the Workplace



\$11.50 US



VOLUME 7 • NUMBER 4
DECEMBER 2009
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Thriving on Challenge

A fresh approach to applying positive psychology to coaching

Bet you have clients who expect a quick, easy fix for happiness. We do. They think everything is supposed to be effortless, and as a coach – particularly if you practice positive psychology – it’s your job to provide them with some self-help, feel-good nostrum that will pass for a coaching exercise. Sorry.

In a world of vast technology where everything material is available at the click of a button, the hard work it takes to achieve the “good life” emotionally seems to have gotten lost in the shuffle. Modern-day conveniences have built up the expectation that getting what we want should result without challenge. With credit cards and the World Wide Web, everything from internet dating to ebay

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parades the promise of a one-click trip to Paradise. But happiness does not come by a simple click of the mouse. Instead, thriving takes effort – a truth many of our clients would rather avoid than accept.

Failure to Thrive

According to researchers, less than 20 percent of people (1 in 5) are actually ‘thriving’ – living the ‘good life’ – today. Worse yet, about the same number of people report symptoms of depression and anxiety. Think about it for a moment. We live during a time when nearly everything we can want is right at our fingertips, yet we’re less happy today than our ancestors were when food was sparse, career paths were non-existent and life expectancy was



short. Additionally, heart disease, obesity, diabetes and a number of other physical and mental disorders are on the rise – a result of modern-day conveniences? Through expectations of ease have we forfeited opportunities to develop the resources essential to thriving emotionally? Have we traded engaging and meaningful lives for comfort, convenience and reality TV?

The Upside of Challenge

These are some of the questions with which positive psychology concerns itself, and why it provides the coaching profession with so much promise. Simply stated, positive psychology is the study of human flourishing. Unlike traditional psychology, its focus is on helping otherwise healthy individuals to be, in layman’s terms, happier. However, as the field of positive psychology matures, it is becoming increasingly focused on the role challenge plays in achieving the ‘good life’. While there is certainly a distinction between the challenges inherent in unforeseen hardship and the type of self-challenge that’s achieved through the pursuit of meaningful life goals, benefits can be derived from both situations.

In fact, a number of positive life changes (i.e. a deeper appreciation of life, a shift in life priorities, and enhanced spirituality, relationships and self-reliance) can result from a broad range of hardships. Research shows that persons experiencing events including heart attacks, breast cancer, plane crashes, shootings, bereavement, recovery from substance addiction and military combat

can thrive afterwards. It might surprise you to know that today's biggest "customer" of positive psychology is the US Army. Positive psychologists Martin Seligman and Karen Reivich of the University of Pennsylvania are leading an effort to train soldiers on how to utilize mental resilience tools to help them better wage the emotional challenges

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of warfare. Despite what many in the popular press would have us believe, battlefield stress does not automatically lead to mental disorder. The same holds true for other stressful and potentially traumatic life experiences.

Leveraged appropriately, even the most severe challenge can lead to personal growth, according to the research. Though most of your clients are probably not dealing with a hardship of the same magnitude of those listed above, it is possible they are struggling with one of the “slings and arrows” of everyday life – a monotonous job, a poor relationship with their spouse, or perhaps the feeling that their life is without purpose or direction. Even though these difficulties may pale in comparison to the hardship experienced on the battlefield, they do present opportunities for positive growth. That’s where the

Challenge Your Clients To Thrive

HERE’S HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR CLIENTS OVERCOME ADVERSITY AND LIVE ENGAGING, MEANINGFUL LIVES:

1. Teach Them to Appreciate Challenge

When your clients are faced with difficulty, be sympathetic, but help them to value the benefits that can result from hardship. After all, sometimes it takes being really unhappy or uncomfortable with a situation to motivate positive change. Viewed through an appreciative eye, hardship can become a true blessing!

2. Give Them a Goal to Work Towards

Goals that are both challenging and specific actually promote life satisfaction and offer opportunities for personal growth. Encourage your clients to take on goals that align with their core values and challenge them in a way that is engaging and meaningful. Then help them build a step-by-step plan to triumph towards these goals.

3. Help Them Fight Their Fears

Fear is the number one thing that holds people back from living authentically. Help your clients to identify the fears that are keeping them from achieving their goals, and challenge them to face each fear one small step at a time.

4. Prepare Them for Combat

Help your clients identify times in their lives when they have successfully managed challenge and have grown because of hardship or adversity they have faced. This exercise can build self-efficacy (the “I think I can” psychological phenomenon), fostering the belief that they are capable of managing challenge, which in turn will better prepare them to tackle tough situations in the future.

5. Inspire Them with a Role Model

By looking at others who have thrived through hardship, we too can learn how to do so. Work with your clients to identify people they can personally relate to who have flourished, despite and even because of hardship. After all, role models are a great source of inspiration.

coach applying the tools of positive psychology can help.

Coaching Toward Positivity

The coach can help the client understand that challenge is an essential part of life and inspire them to trade (at least some of) their modern-day conveniences and reality-show date nights for challenge, engagement and the ‘good life’.

The fact is, it’s easy to be dissatis-

fied with life – because it requires little effort. Thriving takes work, because true growth stems from challenge. Positive psychology shows us that humans have an amazing capacity to overcome just about any hardship and live engaging, meaningful lives. In other words, to thrive.

You can bring these same lessons to your coaching clients (see box above). In fact, we challenge you to do so! •