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RESEARCH PAPER

Telephone-coaching while walking during COVID-19: A pilot study

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Background: The current pandemic has had serious consequences on mental health due to social isolation and various life-style restrictions. While there are a handful of studies examining the effects of coaching while walking, to our knowledge, there is no research evaluating the experience of being coached on the phone while walking.

Aims: The aim of this study was to look at the experiences of being coached over the phone while walking during the first COVID-19 lockdown.

Methods: In this study we surveyed 9 professionals who received six coaching sessions over the phone while walking during the first lockdown of COVID-19. Coaching was delivered by a qualified coach who also walked while coaching. Each session lasted between one and one-and-a half hours. Walking sessions were largely conducted in seaside areas.

Results: All participants found the coaching sessions to be either extremely or very effective at increasing their energy and mood, and most found these to be extremely or very effective at increasing their goals and creativity. The thematic analysis led to the identification of five main themes: (1) enhanced energy; 2) enhanced thinking; 3) enhanced mood; 4) goal setting and 5) feeling supported during covid-19.

Discussion/Conclusion: Telephone walking coaching can be revitalising, mood boosting and effective. In returning to work in the office, hybrid organisations could use walking meetings including telephone walking meetings as an opportunity to increase employee wellbeing, innovation and productivity. Future research should be conducted to examine guidelines for training programmes incorporating coaching outdoors.

Keywords: *Coaching; nature telephone-coaching; walking coaching; COVID-19*

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is an ongoing pandemic of coronavirus disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome. As of 15th October 2021, there have been over 239 million cases and over 4 million, eight hundred thousand deaths attributed to COVID-19 (https://covid19.who.int/). In order to protect individual and collective health, along with handwashing, wearing marks in public, and disinfecting, measures used to prevent the spread of this virus included isolating, social distancing, travel restrictions, and tiered lockdowns. Where possible, organizations shifted to fully remote working (WHO, 2020c). Covid-19 vaccinations are now helping to decrease mortality and reduce hospitalisation (Harder et al., 2021).

While these measures have prevented transmission and saved lives, they came with heavy socio-economic costs including unemployment, poverty and mental health (Pierce et al., 2020; Silva Junior et al.,

2020; Simsir et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2020). Lockdown, travel restrictions and limited social interactions have increased loneliness, anxiety and general mental health, especially for those working from home (Wu et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2020).

There are various effective ways to help individuals manage stress, and promote mental and physical health during such times that fit within the Covid-19 guidelines. These can include spending time in nature (Cooley et al., 2020; Gascon et al., 2015; Ribeiro et al., 2021), walking in nature (Harder et al., 2021) and therapy in outdoor spaces (Cooley et al., 2020). While there is evidence to suggest that coaching can be effective during the pandemic (Jarosz, 2021; Knoll et al., 2021), there is a gap in the research examining the experience and effects of integrating coaching with walking in nature, especially during Covid-19. This study aimed to examine the experiences of receiving telephone coaching while walking during the first Covid-19 lockdown.

Nature, walking and wellbeing

Empirical evidence, largely from systematic reviews, demonstrates the impact of nature on our wellbeing (Beyer, 2014; Bowler et al., 2010; Bratman et al., 2019; Gritzka et al., 2020; Jabbar et al., 2021). Even brief interactions with natural environments are correlated to positive physical and mental outcomes (Howell, 2012). Hossain and colleagues found that exposure to nature was associated with improvements in stress, anxiety, mood disorders, depressive symptoms, affect, cognitive and emotional functions, happiness, and overall mental well-being (Hossain, 2020). This is also in line with a review by Bratman who proposed nature as a fundamental service to human's wellbeing and health (Bratman et al., 2019). Furthermore, a recent thematic meta-synthesis examining the experience of walking therapy in natural spaces identified various practical issues that can help therapists formulate when and how best to use this approach in their practice. The review found outdoor walking therapy to connect clients with nature, enhancing the therapeutic relationship, improving both client and practitioners' wellbeing (Cooley et al., 2020).

There are two main theories that explain the psychological mechanisms of nature on wellbeing. The Stress Reduction Theory (SRT, Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) and Attention Restoration Theory (ART, Ulrich, 1983), explain how contact with nature can reduce stress and restore attentional capacities.

Walking in natural environments such as the countryside has been found to be more restorative than walking in urban places. Walking outside has been found to stimulate creative thinking (Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014). The presence of nature has often been characterized as having an energizing and uplifting impact on human experience (Howell, 2012). In a randomised controlled trial with a nested qualitative element, it was found that walking in a natural environment was experienced as more restorative and energising than walking in an urban area (Shrestha et al., 2021).

Walking is the most common form of physical activity that individuals report participating in (Kruger, 2008). As such, its health benefits have been well studied (Hamer & Chida, 2008; Jeon et al., 2007; Murtagh et al., 2015). In his book 'In praise of walking: the new science of how we walk and why it is good for us', Shane O'Mara, Professor of Experimental Brain research wrote: 'We must start walking again, whether it's up a mountain, down to the park, or simply to school and work. We and our societies will be better for it' (O'Mara, 2019).

Daily walking can help combat sedentary lifestyles and prevent chronic illnesses. For example, physical activities including walking were found to be as effective as pharmacological interventions in reducing cardiovascular mortality (Naci & Ioannidis, 2013). Physical activity is also key to our mental health (Schuch & Stubbs, 2019; Stubbs et al., 2017). During the pandemic, following stay at home orders, individuals started walking and biking more (Doubleday et al., 2021). People who became more physically active outdoors during the pandemic, were found to be less anxious than those who were less active (Lesser & Nienhuis, 2020).

Coaching

The American Psychological Association (APA) highlighted that caring and supportive relationships both inside and outside a family, strongly contribute to resilience (Newman, 2005). A powerful professional relationship that can help individuals in their wellbeing and performance is coaching which focuses: 'both on facilitating goal attainment and enhancing well-being' (Grant, 2007). There is rigorous evidence to demonstrate that coaching can enhance well-being and performance (Grover & Furham, 2016; Theeboom et al., 2013). A recent qualitative study based on six individuals who received positive psychology coaching during the pandemic found five themes. These included decreasing negative emotions, feeling

Journal of Ecopsychology 2021, 1, Article 4, ISSN 2752-5260

re-energised, renewed confidence, an opportunity for self-reflection, and increased awareness (van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2021).

Walking Coaching

There is an increased interest in coaching delivered while walking, largely to combat sedentary lifestyles which are worsening chronic conditions including obesity, diabetes and back pain. However, there is very little research evaluating the effectiveness of walking coaching, and what there is, is limited to case studies (Frates & Crane, 2016) and studies without control groups (O'Riordan & Palmer, 2018).

In one pilot study set in an organisational context, the effects of coaching sessions conducted while sitting, with walking coaching sessions conducted while walking, were compared. Using a single-arm repeated-measures design we measured wellbeing pre- and post-intervention, as well as immediately after each coaching session. Results indicated that walking coaching sessions significantly increased self-esteem, perceived management care, and reduced negative mood (Di Blasi et al., 2018). A follow up study compared the effects of sitting meetings with walking meetings in a higher education setting (Horgan & Di Blasi, 2020).

Due to the start of COVID-19 in 2020, only 19 participants completed the study. No significant difference between the sitting vs walking groups in terms of perceived stress or engagement were found. However, qualitative analysis suggested that walking meetings lowered stress, improved the relationship, lowered mental fatigue and improved creative thinking.

While coaching is traditionally delivered in person, it can also be provided virtually - via telephone or e-coaching, just as health is increasingly being delivered via Telehealth and M-health, for example to increase physical activity and reduce chronic conditions (McDermott et al., 2018). While there is a lack of research comparing the effectiveness of virtual or distance coaching as compared with in person coaching, although some suggest that a blended approach is the most promising approach (Geissler et al., 2014).

To our knowledge, to date there are no studies examining the experience or the impact of coaching on the phone while walking.

This study aims to evaluate the perceived effectiveness on wellbeing and the experience of individuals who received six telephone coaching sessions while both they and their coach walked during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1.
Sample characteristics

Dimension	Participants
Gender, n (%)	
Men	1 (%)
Women	8 (%)
Age, Mean ± SD	44.66 ± 9.23
Relationship status, n (%)	
Married	7 (77.7)
Single	2 (22.2)
Employment status, n (%)	
Self-employed	4 (44.4)
Employed	3 (33.3)
Student	1 (11.1)
Health, n (%)	
Very good	5 (55.5)
Good	2 (22.2)
Moderate	1 (11.1)
Area of residence, n (%)	
Inner city	1
Wooded area	1
Seaside	7

METHODS

Design and Setting

This study is cross-sectional and uses mixed methods to examine the experiences of participants who received 4-6 telephone coaching sessions during the highest level of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in the South of Ireland. A thematic analysis (TA) was applied to analyse written statements. Additionally, quantitative methods were used to explore the experience of receiving telephone coaching while walking.

Sample and Recruitment

All participants read and signed an electronic informed consent form. The study was approved by the School of Applied Psychology Ethics Committee, University College Cork, Ireland (Study protocol ID: STF 1108202016).

Figure 1:
Aerial view of walking trail of one of the participants.

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Study participants were coaching clients who had already received walking coaching side-by-side by one of the authors (JMC). Of the ten eligible participants who received six telephone walking coaching sessions during the pandemic, a total of nine individuals (mean age=44.66, SD= 9.23) agreed to participate in this study. Most participants were women (8 out of 9), married (7 out of 9), and included consultants, business owners, an academic, and a CEO. One participant did not specify their occupation. One had received both sitting and walking coaching in the past, none had experienced walking coaching over the telephone.

Data collection

The data was collected after each participant had received six telephone walking coaching sessions. The coaching sessions took place between late March to July 2020. From the 12th March to 5th May 2020 people could only exercise within 2Km radius from their home. From 5th May to 7th June travel was extended to 5Km from people's homes.

Measures

Participants were asked the following questions using Likert scales (5-point, e.g. from 1= 'extremely effective' to 5= 'not effective') and open-ended responses:

1. How effective were the walking coaching sessions were at improving your: 'Energy', 'Goals', 'Wellbeing', 'Mood', 'Creativity' and 'Coping with the Pandemic'?
2. Has participating in these coaching sessions had an impact on your activity levels (e.g. number of daily steps)?
3. What role did being in nature, rather than sitting in a room, have on your overall experience of the coaching sessions?
4. Given that coaching normally happens sitting down in a room, in your opinion what effect did one-to-one coaching by telephone have on the coaching relationship?
5. What role did walking have in your experience of the coaching session?

Sociodemographic measures included gender, age, level of urbanity of the place of residence.

Journal of Ecopsychology 2021, 1, Article 4, ISSN 2752-5260

Table 2:
Perceived Effectiveness of Telephone Walking Coaching on Wellbeing

		Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Slightly effective	Not effective
1	Energy Levels	4 (44.4%)	5 (55.5%)			
2	Goals	4 (44.4%)	3 (33.3%)	2 (2.22%)		
3	Wellbeing	5 (55.5%)	2 (2.22%)	2 (2.22%)		
4	Mood	5 (55.5%)	4 (44.4%)			
5	Creativity	2 (2.22%)	3 (33.3%)	3 (2.22%)	1 (11.1%)	
6	Ability to cope with the pandemic	5 (55.5%)	3 (33.3%)	1 (11.1%)		

Procedure

A total of ten participants were offered pro-bono coaching in order to pilot test the effectiveness and practicality of telephone walking coaching once lockdown restrictions that were placed due to COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

Of the ten participants, 9 agreed to participated and signed a consent form. Each participant arranged a time to speak with their coach on either a weekly basis or every two weeks, for a total of 1 ¼ to 1 ½ hours. Participants were advised to wear comfortable gear and to walk in safe areas (e.g. flat terrains). Each coaching session took place over the telephone with both the coach and the coachee walking. Following governmental guidelines, all the walks took place within 2Km of the participants' homes, in the South of Ireland. The coach and most of the participants lived in coastal areas. At the end of the six weeks, participants were invited to fill out an online survey using *Qualtrics*.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Quantitative analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS v.25. Descriptive statistics were calculated as mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for continuous variables; categorical variables were presented as frequencies and percentages.

Qualitative analysis: The experience of walking coaching described by the participants once coaching sessions ended, was analysed using thematic analysis. This was conducted based on the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012). Thematic analysis highlights patterns which reoccur throughout the data set and encompasses a particular perspective. In the initial stages of analysis, the participants' transcripts were examined meticulously which resulted in a collection of candidate themes. The analytical process highlighted the fact that some of the candidate themes were sub-themes of a broader concept. It became evident that there was a distinct pattern in the way that the participants described their experiences of their coaching sessions. These patterns permeated the entire data set and became the central themes.

RESULTS

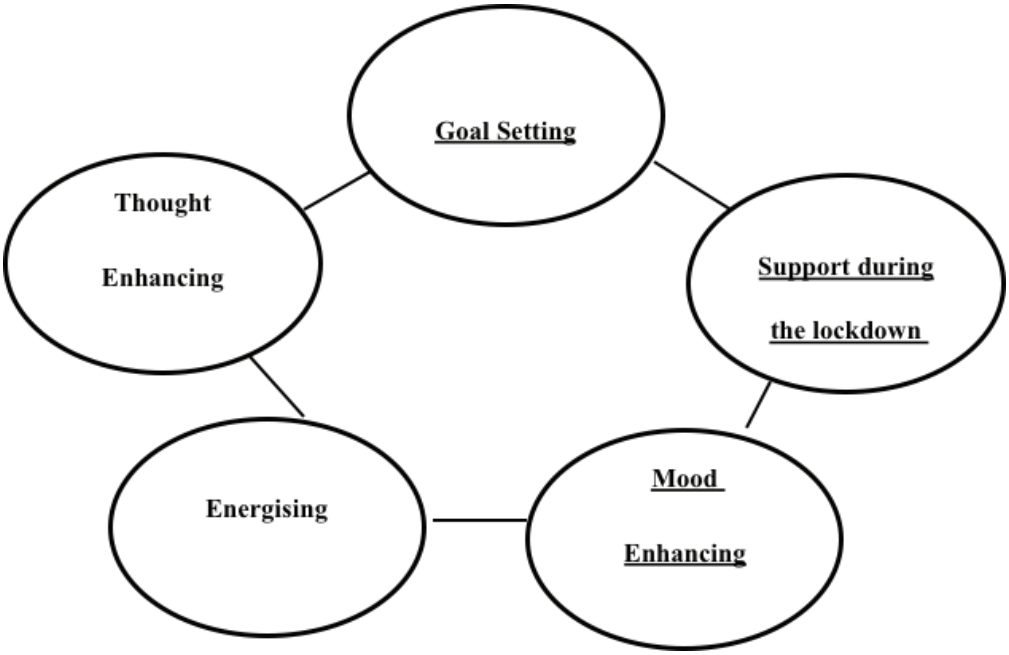
Quantitative Results

As can be seen from Table 1, when participants were asked how effective the telephone walking sessions were at raising their energy, all said it was either *extremely* or *very effective*. They all it was either extremely or very effective at boosting their mood.

In terms of helping with goal setting, four (out of 9, 44.4%) thought the coaching was extremely effective, two (22.2%) very effective and two (22.2%) moderately effective. Most of our participants felt that the telephone walking coaching was either *extremely effective* (n=5, 55.5%) or *very effective* (n=3, 33.3%) at helping them cope with the pandemic.

Many (5 out of 9, 55%) felt that participating in these walking coaching sessions had a 'definitely beneficial impact on their activity levels'. Three had used their Fitbit to count the steps

Figure 2:
Schematic representations of the thematic findings of the telephone walking coaching sessions.



taken on average during the coaching sessions and of these one reported an average of 8,000 steps and two reported an average of 10,000 steps.

All felt that being in nature, rather than sitting in a room, had either had an extremely important (5 of 9, 55.5%) or very important (4 out of 9, 44.4%) role on their overall experience of the coaching sessions. When asked what role did walking have on their experience of the coaching session, most (6 out of 9) said it helped 'a great deal', and three said it 'helped a lot'.

When asked, "Given that coaching normally happens sitting down in a room, in your opinion what effect did one-to-one coaching by telephone have on the coaching relationship?", four out of nine (44.4%) said it had a positive effect, one felt it has a very positive effect, and the rest (4 out of 9) said it had no effect upon the relationship.

Qualitative Themes

The use of qualitative analytical methodologies provides us with a nuanced perspective of the participants' experiences with the walking coaching. Presented in Figure 1, the dominant themes generated from the data were: 1) "Walking coaching sessions as thought enhancing"; 2) "Walking coaching sessions as energising"; 3) "Walking coaching sessions as a mood enhancing experience"; 4) Walking coaching sessions as helpful in setting and achieving goals"; and 5) "Walking coaching sessions as supportive during lockdown".

Thought Enhancing

Participants commented on how the walking coaching sessions affected their thinking enabling participants to think more effectively, through enhanced clarity and creativity. For example, one participant emphasized how she felt more could be achieved because of walking outdoors and how coaching helped her become more creative and clearer:

"There is a sense that more is possible, when you're outside walking rather than sitting at the desk. I feel I made better, broader decisions and thought more creatively than I may have done during a static session. It has been overwhelming at times but the clarity of thought

Journal of Ecopsychology 2021, 1, Article 4, ISSN 2752-5260

I gain from the coaching sessions has been enormously beneficial. Moving and the changing surroundings definitely helped me to think more broadly and creatively." (P2)

The reasons that participants gave to their enhanced cognitions included walking and moving:

"Much more movement, helped me think a lot better." (P4)

"Walking brought more energy to my thinking and improved my mood." (P6)

"The physical movement of walking and moving forward helped my thoughts flow." (P7)

"Energy improved along with my levels of concentration though out my working day." (P4)

Interestingly, one of the participants noticed that walking outside, as well as stopping to think, was what she found helpful:

"I like to move when talking - better to be out in the open rather than pacing a room. I found I liked stopping too, walk a bit, stop and think for a bit, walk again." (P3)

Being in nature led one participant to explain how this was what that helped to focus the mind:

"Being outside in a beautiful environment helps to focus the mind. It takes you away from what could be a stressful environment." (P5)

Energising

All participants reported feeling an increase in their energy after the sessions:

"*I felt a lot more energised at the end of those sessions.*" (P1)

"*Energy improved along with my levels of concentration though out my working day.*" (P4)

Some explained that this increased vitality this was due to the walking:

"*As you walk you feel better about yourself a lot more that sitting at a computer screen, this gives you an abundance of energy.*" (P2)

Others felt the energy came from moving and being outdoors:

"The fact of being outside and moving added to the energy I felt towards following through on my decisions and action items". (P7)

"*Walking brought more energy to my thinking and improved my mood." (P3)*

Participant 3 and 8 described the energy as coming from the coaching conversation:

"Something which led to a positive way forward was energising." (P3)

"I love walking anyway, but I definitely feel energised after a coaching on the move session". (P8)

Three of the participants explained that they felt particularly revitalised after a coaching session because of the combination of walking and coaching outside:

"Moving and the changing surroundings gave me energy to follow through or at least feel positive about the next steps." (P7)

"*The conversation and physical activity led to increased energy and a more positive outlook on my day".* (P4)

"The physicality of walking & talking at the same time also means you feel more energised." (P8)

Mood enhancing

Participants mentioned that the sessions had a positive effect on their mood, and mentioned how this was the result of a combination of the coaching session, walking and being in nature:

"*The conversation and physical activity led to increased energy and a more positive outlook on my day.*" (P4)

"I always felt more positive." (P5)

"*Being outside and moving already improves my mood and the added bonus of doing some coaching at the same time gave me a real sense of satisfaction.*" (P7)

"*My mood improved along with my sense of wellbeing.*"

"I felt inspired and happy after each meeting. Because I was happier and inspired, I had more ideas. I think walking in nature really helped. Having my coach being so supportive also helped a lot". (P1)

Two felt that their positive mood derived from walking:

"Walking helped me think and increased my mood by stimulating endorphins." (P1)

"Walking brought more energy to my thinking and improved my mood". (P3)

Participant 6 described how much she enjoyed walking outdoors:

"Much nicer to be outside - I looked forward to the walk. Sitting inside would not have been as much fun". (P6)

"Because I was happier and inspired, I had more ideas. I think walking in nature really helped". (P6)

When asked about the role of nature on the experience of the coaching session, participants reported this as a source of peace:

"*I always walked in the woods during the sessions and found it very calming and peaceful. There is no way I would have had the same sense of well-being from sitting in a room. It's so refreshing getting away*

from the desk and having the space to think outside with nature." (P8)

"It was definitely less confining that being in a room and somehow freeing?"

GOALS

All of the participants said they felt the sessions really helped them space and time to think about their goals, prioritising and move towards these. For example, participants said:

"*It helped me identify key actions that need to be taken in order to get me to my goal". (P4)*

"It created space for me to focus on me, not just my work and my family, but my personal goals". (P1)

Similarly, participant 7 felt they became a lot clearer about their goals and what they needed to do to achieve this:

"*I definitely gained clarity on the goal itself and the steps I needed to take to get there*". (P7)

One participant was very excited to report they achieved their first goal:

"*I achieved the first goal set - it definitely made a difference*". (P6)

How the coach was able to help them achieve their goals was expressed well by participant 8, who explained how:

"*Julie always asks great questions and helps frame scenarios so well. I always walk away with clear steps that are achievable and love the accountability of putting deadlines to the steps*." (P8)

Support during the lockdown

The pandemic was described by the participants as '*overwhelming*' (P1), '*isolating*' (P4), and '*stressful*' (P6, P5). Words to illustrate the experience of the coaching sessions included '*supportive*' and '*encouraging*' (P6).

One participant explained how:

"It was wonderful to be able to have that kind of support and encouragement during such a stressful time and to focus on something I was very excited about." (P6)

One added that this was particularly important while social distancing:

"I was walking more during the lockdown, but it was at times isolated, so it helped to connect with someone but also to work on something positive rather than just chat." (P5)

One participant found that the telephone coaching sessions reinforced the relationship:

"Despite not seeing face to face it strengthened the relationship." (P4)

Another two participants explained that this type of coaching was more informal and more personable, and this allowed them to talk more openly:

"It felt a little bit more personal and really helped me open up more than I would have in a more formal environment." (P5)

"It might have been better - sometimes easier to open up when you are not right in front of someone." (P3)

The importance of safety and following governmental guidelines during a pandemic while getting all the benefits from the coaching sessions was indicated by participant 3:

"I would not have been comfortable sitting in a room with a coach during this time. Coaching while walking and on the phone meant that I could stay within my radius (at peak lockdown), be outside in the fresh air and have all the benefits of one-to-one coaching without any social distancing issues." (P3)

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of telephone coaching while walking during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland. Nine participants received a total of six walking coaching sessions.

Participants felt the coaching sessions were extremely or very effective at increasing their energy and their mood following the sessions. While they described the pandemic as isolating, overwhelming and stressful, they felt energised, clear, happy, motivated, after the telephone coaching walking sessions.

Five themes were identified from the qualitative data and these included enhanced energy, thinking, mood, goals and supportive during the pandemic. Participants expressed that the increase or abundance of energy came from walking outdoors in nature, and from specific aspects of the coaching conversation such as the clients feeling they were moving closer to their goals.

Similar findings were found in a study also using thematic analysis were participants were asked to walk either in an urban or a rural area (Shrestha et al., 2021). The themes generated in

Journal of Ecopsychology 2021, 1, Article 4, ISSN 2752-5260

both studies highlighted that walking in nature was restorative, energising, and enjoyable.

Because the coaching sessions took place over the phone, these were safe and the participants felt these sessions were effective at helping them cope with the pandemic. They felt comfortable because they didn't need to worry about social distancing. Coaching helped them become clear about their goals, to prioritise these, and create steps to reach these.

While there is limited qualitative research on the energising effects of walking in nature, these findings are consistent with quantitative studies finding that being outdoors in nature is energising (Ryan et al., 2010; Ojala et al., 2019) and with more recent exploratory work on the connectedness to nature during the pandemic (Haasova et al., 2020). Our findings were also similar to those of van Nieuwerbugh and colleagues in their qualitative study on the experience of coaching during the pandemic (van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2021).

Participants described how much they looked forward to the sessions, how enjoyable they found these to be, as well as positive and calming. Walking in nature has been identified as a source of mental wellness (Bratman et al., 2019), increasing positive mood and reducing anxiety (de Brito et al., 2019; Song et al., 2020). Furthermore, research conducted during the pandemic found that exercising decreased anxiety (Lesser & Nienhuis, 2020).

Participants reported that setting and moving towards their goals and the support they received from their coach was an important outcome of the coaching sessions. While goal setting, planning and accountability are key elements of coaching, it is difficult to extrapolate on how walking coaching might be more effective than sitting coaching in terms of goals. It is possible that by moving outdoors, the reported increase in positive emotions and clarity of thinking might play a role in becoming clear on what individuals wish to achieve and what steps are required to move towards these goals. Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build theory can help to explain how positive emotions broaden an individual's moment -to-moment thoughts and actions while discovering new and creative actions, ideas and social support that can help build on those actions (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002).

In relation to social support, in a previous small study using a repeated measures design and a standardised measure of care, participants reported feeling significantly more cared for by their coach when walking, rather than when sitting (Di Blasi et al., 2018). In other words, participants who were coached while walking perceived their coach as more caring, attentive, and able to listen, than when they sat with the same coach.

Revell and McLeod found that eighteen therapists who used walk and talk in their practice reported that this approach helped to shift 'stuckness' in clients and enhanced psychological processing. Therapists also noted that walking side by side rather than facing one another promoted a collaborative way of working (Revell & McLeod, 2015).

Limitations and recommendations

This pilot study was not without its limitations and as such, the findings should be considered with caution. First, the sample size was small and a control group was not included. Second, the participants had already established a coaching relationship with the coach prior to the study so it cannot be determined whether or not the telephone coaching sessions would be as effective when entering a new coaching relationship. Third, many of the participants also walked in coastal areas and it is difficult to generalise the findings to telephone coaching sessions conducted in busy urban areas.

This study is also limited in that data was collected after the six coaching sessions had ended. In order to examine the benefits effectiveness of the coaching intervention, it would have been preferable to collect data at baseline, prior to the coaching sessions, and ideally straight after each session. This would have helped to identify changes from baseline to follow-up, allowing the immediate effects of each session to be assessed. This was the approach taken in a previous study where coaching sessions conducted while walking, were compared to coaching conducted while sitting (Di Blasi et al., 2018).

Further research should include a larger sample, use pre and post questionnaires, ideally at baseline, immediately after each session, and at the end of the interventions, and have a control group in order to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of the coaching sessions. In addition, there are various factors that may have affected our participants, such as the environment, the weather, walking, and the coaching relationship itself. Having a control group and random assignment would help to isolate the effects of certain factors. It would also be helpful to use measures aiming to assess the role of the coaching relationship itself, by for example adapting the Consultation and Relational Empathy Questionnaire (CARE) (Mercer et al., 2004).

Finally, including psychobiological assessments such as heart rate variability (HRV) or salivary cortisol measures would help to identify the impact of coaching outdoors not just on subjective wellbeing measures, helping us to identify more objective, psychophysiological changes (Goessl et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

In this study the experiences of being coached while walking during the COVID-19 pandemic were examined. The participants described the experience as being energising, calming, and creative. This seemed to stem largely from being in nature, but also from walking. Despite it being conducted remotely, the coaching relationship was experienced as supportive, encouraging and safe. This was interesting as the coaching sessions were conducted in the first few months of the pandemic, during the strictest lockdown restrictions, at a particularly anxious and isolating time.

These findings may help encourage coaches to conduct their sessions over the phone, while both they and their clients walk in a natural environment. The study also adds to the revitalising and energising sources of nature and walking already identified in the literature. More importantly this research highlights how coaching can be effectively and safely conducted remotely, while walking outdoors. As companies move towards hybrid work, having one-to-one walking meetings for employees and their managers or with their coaches, whether on the phone or face-to-face, is likely to help enhance their physical and psychological health as well as work engagement and performance. ■

Citation

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Journal of Ecopsychology 2021, 1, Article 4, ISSN 2752-5260

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