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A Gratitude Based Positive Psychology Coaching Case Study

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Abstract

The case study report illustrates how Gratitude can be integrated into a series of coaching sessions. Janet, an undergraduate student, wanted to feel happier, and cultivating gratitude has been shown to increase well-being (Cunha, Pellanda & Reppold, 2019). Pre and post the four-week coaching encounter she completed the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6) and a Wheel of Life (WoL). Using the WoL as a goal setting tool, the gratitude exercises were selected to complement the coachee's weekly goals. Post sessions her SHS score increased by 50% while her GQ6 score increased by 33%. There were also changes in her WoL ratings, particularly in the area of family and friends, as well as personal growth. Although the direction of these changes is predicted by the literature, we may need to be cautious about interpreting the strength of these changes. They may be due to a placebo effect. An inherent weakness of the case study approach is that factors other than the intervention can impact measured changes. Nevertheless, this case study does outline a process of how to integrate a positive psychology intervention into a coaching encounter, and may act as a template for this type of work.

Implications for Practitioners

- Using psychometric scales pre and post provides feedback for the coach on the effectiveness of the intervention.
- These scores can be useful in locating where the coachee lies in comparison to peers. This can be very useful information for the coachee in terms of contextualising their progress.

- Incorporating particular gratitude exercises can be done dynamically in response to the coachee's session by session goals. The literature acts as a guide in the selection of these exercises.
- Working with a coachee initially to improve their well-being can resource them to achieve goals more easily later in the coaching process

Introduction: the context

There is considerable debate about how positive psychology interventions (PPI) can be integrated into coaching (for review see van Nieuwerburgh & Biswas-Diener, 2020). This case report illustrates the incorporation of gratitude into a coaching relationship. There is strong evidence that gratitude interventions are effective in improving psychological well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Park et al., 2004; Watkins et al., 2003; Cunha, Pellanda & Reppold, 2019). Typically, gratitude exercises are self-administered. Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson (2005) initiated this trend when they reported on a series of psychological interventions designed to improve happiness. Gratitude exercises was one of those they identifies. Cunha et al, continued this practice of asking participants to carry out the intervention themselves.

Grant and Atad (2021) argue that although PPI impact positively on subjective well-being, Coaching Psychology (CP) interventions have additional benefits which they propose are brought about through increases in personal agency. The resultant ability to focus on goals

and self-regulation results in increased psychological well-being. In this case study we explore how gratitude, a PPI, could be incorporated into a coaching encounter.

As originally argued by Seligman (2007) the contribution of Positive Psychology was one way, that of providing the practice of coaching with evidence-based interventions and valid measures. Since then, cross fertilisation from one to the other has been recognised and Positive Psychology Coaching (PPC) could be regarded as incorporating the perspectives of the goal orientation, the traditional domain of coaching, and well-being, the traditional domain of Positive Psychology. It is this definition, espoused by van Nieuwerburgh and Biswas-Diener (2020) that we have adopted in this paper, that is a process which focuses on attaining meaningful goal attainment in a way that enhances psychological well-being. Oftentimes the initial focus can be well-being, such that the individual becomes more resourced and resilient such that their ability to achieve goals is enhanced (van Nieuwerburgh and Biswas-Diener). In reasoning about what constitutes PPC Lomas (2019) provides a useful rubric: does it pertain to well-being and does it involve a coaching relationship. Consequently, this case study falls within the scope of PPC.

As originally argued by Seligman (2007) a strength of Positive Psychology is evidence based interventions. In this vein Trom and Burke (2021) have demonstrated that coaching can increase the impact of gratitude interventions. The strength of this approach is that these findings can be generalisable. However, the measured impact of the intervention is based on comparing group means. Most participants' scores would lie around the mean, or that is the assumption. However, there may be participants who benefited greatly, and well as those who did not benefit at all. This is the dilemma that a practitioner coach faces - to what extent is an evidence based approach appropriate for a particular individual, and how should the intervention be individualised. By examining one case we hope to begin to answer this question. Further randomised control trials do not give us an insight into the qualitative

meaning of what these changes in scale scores represent in a particular individual's life. By studying one person we hope to better understand this. In this way we can begin to fill in the blanks in an evidence-based manner of with whom these interventions should be used, and what are the impacts in a person's life. Of course, one case study does not answer these questions, it does contribute to a subsequent meta-analysis which would examine these issues across many cases. This study represents the first such case.

Case Description and Informed Consent

Janet (not her real name) is a 22-year-old 3rd year undergraduate Law student. In the initial chemistry session she stated that she would like to feel happier and improve her well-being in a more balanced way. She also mentioned her struggle in social events/occasions because she is quite shy, which makes her feel uneasy, and that she would like to be more comfortable attending social gatherings and making new connections. She said she wanted to experience stable positive emotions and feel more relaxed as she gets easily overwhelmed with things or places unfamiliar to her. Based on this, she contracted for a series of Positive Psychology Coaching sessions. Given her presenting reasons, the coach and coachee, as part of the partnering process, decided to focus on gratitude, ~~It is for these reason that we choose to use gratitude,~~ as it is effective in improving well-being ~~and it is also effective in~~ as well as improving social ties (Watkins et al., 2003; Fedrickson, 2004)

The coaching process.

The first author conducted the coaching sessions. She is a psychologist who has been trained in Positive Psychology coaching and has a master's level qualification. The second

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author analysed the results. Prior to and after the coaching sessions Janet completed the following:

A Wheel of Life: Janet chose eight areas of her life that were important to her and rated her satisfaction with them from 1 to 10. These were then charted, see figure 1. This also acted as a goal setting exercise.

The Subjective Happiness Scale-[SHS] (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999): This is a four item likert scale (1-7). The scale reliability is 0.86. Her pre-score placed her in the unhappy range.

The Gratitude Questionnaire [GQ-6] (McCullough et al, 2002): This is a six item Likert scale (1-7). The scale reliability is 0.94. Her pre-score placed her in the bottom 25 per cent.

Sessions

In the sessions the wheel of life was used as a goal-oriented tool. As the coachee explored each area the coach probed further with: ‘What would you like to achieve?’, ‘How would you feel moving up in the rank?’, ‘What options do you have?’ The literature on gratitude was then searched to select appropriate exercises related to Janet’s specific goals.

Session one

At the onset Janet stated that she would like to be happier. In this session Janet explored what this would mean. Janet was introduced to the ‘three good things’ exercise - write down three things that went well for her that day and think about why for one week. The impact of this on positive affect has been demonstrated by McCullough et al (2003), Koo et al (2008) and Lyubomirsky et al (2005).

Session two

Janet explored what happiness meant to her when she said that she wanted to experience more stable emotions and feel more relaxed. This session incorporated gratitude contemplation where she was asked to think globally and write about positive experiences, such as summer holidays and so on, for one day this week. Watkins et al (2003) reported on how focusing on grateful experiences helps activate and elevate immediate positive mood. Further, Emmons and Selton (2002) reported that grateful thinking fosters savouring of positive life experiences so that individuals can extract the maximum enjoyment from life circumstances.

Session three

In this session Janet described herself as being introverted and said that she struggles at social occasions. She wanted to be more sociable, feel more relaxed and comfortable connecting with others. She strategised about writing and delivering a gratitude letter. This activity is said to increase happiness and stimulate positive behaviour change (Froh et al., 2009; Seligman et al., 2005). Moreover, in the context of broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2004), gratitude can serve to build social bonds.

Session Four

In the final session Janet reviewed her goals, her progress, as well as the progress that she would like to make. The coach reviewed her notes of the previous sessions for Janet and took notes of her reflections on the progress she had made and would like to make into the future. As a way of rounding off this process she was asked which gratitude exercise she would like to repeat. She chose the 'three good thing's exercise from week 1, saying that it is easier to practice and maintain long-term. This is important in increasing the likelihood of her

maintaining this positive behavioural change in the long-term. She expressed confidence that she could maintain this practice.

Coaching outcomes.

The statistical appraisal of therapeutic change within a single case has a long and slightly contentious history (Payne & Jones, 1957; Nunnally, 1975; Nunnally & Kotsch 1985; Lambert, Shapiro & Bergin, 1986, Christensen & Mendoza, 1986; Maasen, 2000). The most widely adopted approach is to utilise the Reliable Change Index (RCI) of Jacobson and Truax (1991) which utilises the Standard Error of Measurement (SEM) of the psychometric device being used to evaluate change. Given an initial estimate of the reliability and variance of the device, the difference between the pre and post scores is converted to the RCI by:-

$$RCI = \frac{Pre - Post}{\sqrt{2(SD\sqrt{1 - r_{tt}})^2}}$$

This is distributed as a z-score with a mean of zero and variance of 1. The standard deviation (SD) and the reliability (rtt) may be taken from appropriate test norms. Ideally, the reliability estimate will be based upon a test-retest estimate although single administration estimates such as Alpha are often used.

The RCI has sometimes been criticised because it does not take into account regression to the mean. Speers advocates an approach in which the confidence interval of the post-score is obtained using a formula that he attributes to Edwards and Nunnally which has come to be known as the EN method:

$$EN = (r_{tt}(Pre - Mean) + Mean) \pm 2 \times SD\sqrt{1 - r_{tt}}$$

Where the mean is taken from appropriate test norms. In table 1 the application of the RCI and the EN estimates to examine the changes in Janet's scores on the Subjective Happiness Scale and the Gratitude Questionnaire are summarised.

Table 1:
Statistical Estimates of Clinical Change

	Happiness ¹	Gratitude ²
Mean	4.80	36.90
S.D.	1.12	4.92
Reliability	0.85	0.94
Pre-Score	4	27
Post-Score	6	36
RCI	3.26	5.28
EN	3.25 – 4.99	25.18 – 30.00

¹ Norms taken from Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999).

² Norms taken from McCullough et al, (2002).

Janet's Subjective Happiness Scale pre score was 4. Using Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) criteria, this score falls within the unhappy range (scoring below the median = 5.00). Her post score of 6 falls within the happy range. Using the reliability estimate of 0.85 the SEM is estimated at 0.43. This results in an RC index of 3.26 which is statistically significant at the 1% level. The confidence interval of the post score using the EN estimate is 3.25 to 4.99. The difference between her pre and post scores represents a 50% increase in her measured level of happiness and shows a fairly unequivocal improvement in subjective happiness. In a PP and gratitude intervention Cunha, Pellanda, Reppold (2019) reported a post mean SHS score of 19.99, which converts to a scale score of 4.99. The prescore was 4.6.

Janet's Gratitude Questionnaire pre score was 27. According to McCullough, Emmons and Tsang (2002) those who have a score below 35 are below the 25th percentile. Her post

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score of 36 places her above this cut-off. Using the reliability estimate of 0.94 the SEM is estimated at 1.20. This results in an RC index of 5.28 which is statistically significant at the 1% level. The confidence interval of the post score using the EN estimate is 25.18 to 30.00 showing that Janet's post score of 36 is well outside random statistical expectation. The difference between her pre and post scores represents a 33% increase in her measured level of gratitude. This compares well with work by Trom and Burke (2021) who tested the effectiveness of PPC on a gratitude intervention. Their post intervention mean score was 35.95, the prescore was 33.67.

Figure 1 presents the ratings of the completed pre and post Wheel of Life exercise that Janet completed before and after the coaching intervention. A visual inspection of this figure indicates improved ratings in areas of her life that Janet chose as being important to her. Of particular note is that her rating for family and friends improved from 5 to 9, personal growth improved from 4 to 7, while career improved from 4 to 6. Career goals were not a specific focus for Janet during these sessions. Nevertheless, she reported that the intervention did impact this area. However, there was no change in ratings for Janet's relationship with her significant other. Overall, Janet's wheel of life score has increased from 37 ($m=4.6$) to 51 ($m=6.4$). This represents an increase of 38% in the expressed level of satisfaction with her life.

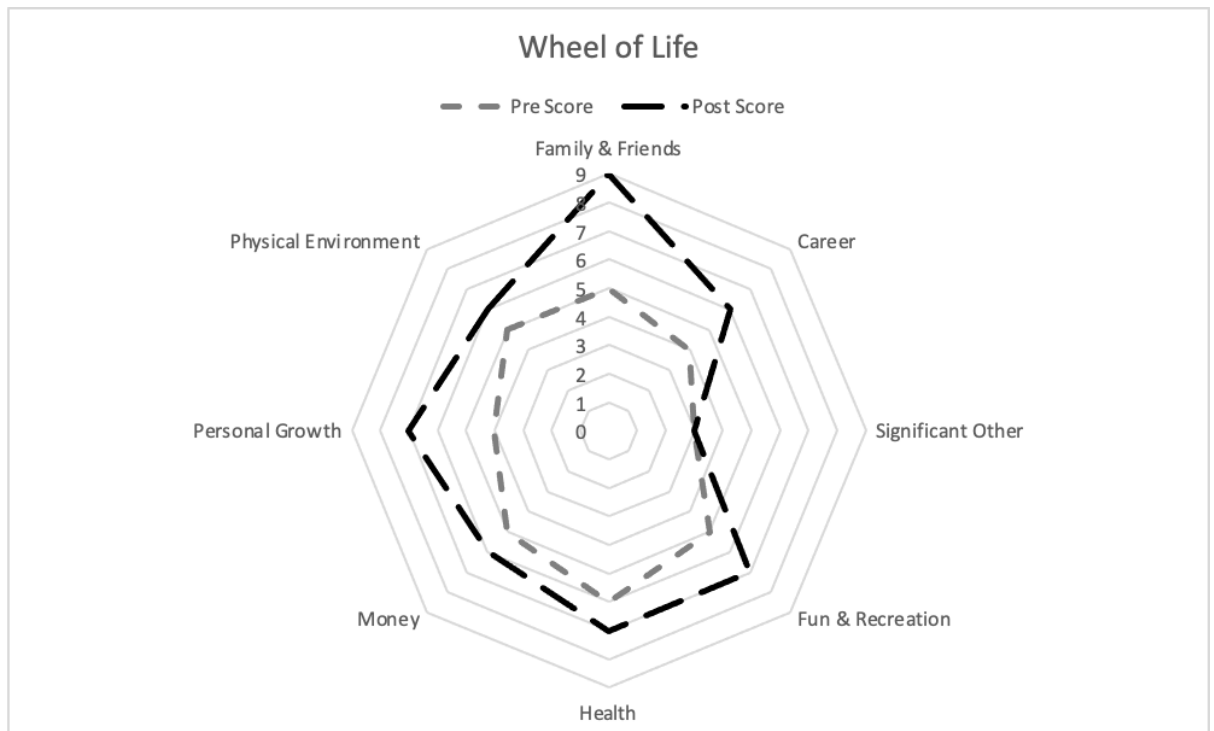


Figure 1: Wheel of Life Pre- and Post test Scores

The coachee's perspective

As well as checking back with Janet, this account is based on notes that the coach took during the sessions. Janet said that she felt happier and enjoyed life more in general as a result of the coaching, she was more comfortable with herself and felt she was more open minded. During the pre-interview, Janet spoke about her experience of unstable emotions which had been persistent for a while and how she found it difficult to relax and enjoy life, and how she would like to feel happier with herself. In her post interview, she spoke about the positive experiences that had occurred over the past four weeks, *“Since the intervention, I seem to respond to more social gatherings lately than before and I have made some new friends, one of them has invited me to a birthday party in April and I am looking forward to it”*. She also talked about her frequent phone calls to her family particularly her parents just to say hi, which was not something she would usually do before the intervention. Janet’s changed experience of her life is consistent with changes in her level of gratitude, which in turn is consistent with

reported higher levels of happiness as well as changes in the pattern of her responses to the Wheel of Life exercise.

Janet said that the experience had given her a whole new perspective in life, and she would like to learn more about positive psychology and continue with the process. *“I find this whole experience fascinating, though a bit different and perhaps difficult to see good in almost everything or to be grateful when things are tough, but it feels good now when I look back at the times I was expressing this gratitude, very practical and enjoyable. I think it's definitely something I would like to keep doing. I'd love to know more about this positive psychology thing in future”*.

Janet reported after the sessions that she was more appreciative of people and things, the literature supports the argument that this would boost positive feelings and satisfaction, and decrease the possibility of her taking things in life for granted. And further those grateful individuals are appreciative of the contribution of others to their happiness (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Koo et al., 2008; Watkins et al., 2003).

Lessons Learned

This case study provides an illustration of how gratitude can be incorporated into a coaching encounter. Janet wanted to increase her level of well-being and so was open to trying something new. This is an important point as a coachee who came with a performance goal may not see the immediate relevance of these practices, albeit that this approach would, by increasing their well-being and increasing their resources, put them in a better position to achieve their goals. Linked to this was our strategy of using the literature to tailor the gratitude exercises to Janet's expressed goals. rather than the application of a behavioural prescription. The randomised control trials provide us with these prescriptions, our skill as coaches was individualising these. Further, as well as ensuring that our approach was evidence based,

sharing this evidence with Janet was an important factor in optimising her motivation, as outcome expectations are an important component of coaching success (Molyn, de Haan, van der Veen, & Gray, 2021).

Oftentimes it can be difficult to demonstrate the changes that a coachee has made to them. In this respect the SHS and the GQ-6 played an important role. Janet could see the change from pre to post, which surprised her. In addition, being able to compare scores to samples reported in the literature helps contextualise them. These scales are narrow in their focus, and so would not pick up all changes. The Wheel of Life did pick up other changes in areas of Janet's life that were important to her. Scoring this does not have psychometric validity, however in combination with a visual representation it can help map changes. What is important here is the coachee's understanding of what these scores represent in their lives.

In addition to this, her level of satisfaction with key areas of her life that were important to her also increased. A contribution of this case study is that it illustrates how a gratitude intervention could be delivered within the context of a series coaching conversations such that an individual can increase their levels of well-being while they are establishing goals for important areas of their lives.

The positive emotional, physical and interpersonal changes that Janet reported in her life are consistent with Fredrickson's (2004) Broaden and Build theory. What was particularly striking was how she said she had become more outgoing and adventurous. This would support the argument that gratitude can serve to build social bonds and that there are reciprocal relationships among gratitude, subjective happiness and good social relationships. (Watkins et al., 2003; Park et al., 2004). The coaching encounter was short, however there are indications of a positive shift and the beginnings of positive behavioural changes in her life.

It is entirely possible that the increases in the ratings could be due to a placebo effect, as Cregg and Cheavens (2021) argue can occur. We cannot exclude this possibility. However, we believe that we can be confident about these changes as they are consistent with the changes that Janet reported in her life. Further they are consistent with the Trom and Burke (2021) trial where coaching was used to amplify the impact of gratitude, and so are in the predicted direction. However, the strength of these changes is another matter. In terms of the scale scores the increases were larger than would be predicted. Janet may represent a profile where this type of intervention is very effective. Equally, other factors may have intervened to boost these scores. Among other factors, a placebo effect may have amplified them. This is a disadvantage of the case study method, it is difficult to exercise experimental control, and so for us it is difficult to fully interpret the strength of the measured effect. This will need to be done in the context of other such case studies, of which this is the first.

Nevertheless, this case study begins to answer the question of how to individualise gratitude interventions within coaching contexts. It demonstrates one way in which it could be achieved such that it impacted positively on a coachee. It should not be taken as a blueprint on how a series of coaching sessions should be structured, rather it is an illustration of the principles involved. As such it adds to the multiple ways in which PPC can be expressed in actual practice.

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