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Integrating Positive Psychology and the Solution-Focused Approach with Cognitive-Behavioural Coaching: the Integrative Cognitive-Behavioural Coaching Model

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Abstract

Cognitive-behavioural coaching (CBC) is a well-established, evidence-based approach to coaching. It is based on the principle that characterises cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), that it is not the events per se which cause distress or joy but the way the individual interprets them. CBC techniques are therefore mainly based on identifying how the coachee perceives key events in the process of change and on modifying unhelpful, performance-blocking beliefs. Experimenting with new behaviours that will challenge old beliefs and strengthen new, empowering ones, is also a hallmark of CBC. Despite its effectiveness in a range of coaching scenarios, traditional CBC still lacks a language for focussing on strengths and positive emotions. For this reason, there is a growing number of cognitive-behavioural coaches interested in integrating tools and techniques derived from Positive Psychology (PP) and the Solution-Focused (SF) approach. Here we propose Integrative Cognitive-Behavioural Coaching, a model of coaching essentially based on the cognitive-behavioural perspective but which also encapsulates key aspects of PP and the SF approach to coaching.

Keywords: *integrative cognitive-behavioural coaching; cognitive-behavioural coaching; positive psychology; solution-focused coaching*

Abstrait

Le coaching cognitivo-comportemental (CBC) est une approche fondée sur la preuve et fondée sur des preuves du coaching. Il est fondé sur le principe qui caractérise la thérapie cognitivo-comportementale (TCC), que ce ne sont pas les événements en soi qui provoquent la détresse ou la joie, mais la manière dont les individus les interprètent. Les techniques de CBC sont donc principalement basées sur l'identification de la façon dont le coachee perçoit les événements clés dans le processus de changement et sur la modification des croyances inutiles et de blocage des performances. Expérimenter avec de nouveaux comportements qui mettront en évidence les anciennes croyances et renforcera les nouveaux, les autonomes, est également une caractéristique de CBC. Malgré son efficacité dans une gamme de scénarios de coaching, la CBC traditionnelle manque encore d'une langue pour se concentrer sur les forces et les émotions positives. Pour cette raison, il existe un nombre croissant d'entraîneurs cognitifs et comportementaux intéressés par l'intégration d'outils et de techniques dérivés de la psychologie positive (PP) et de l'approche axée sur la solution (SF). Nous proposons ici un coaching cognitivo-comportemental intégrateur, un modèle de coaching fondé essentiellement sur le point de vue cognitivo-comportemental mais qui englobe également les aspects clés du PP et l'approche SF du coaching.

Mots clés: *Coaching cognitivo-comportemental intégratif; Coaching cognitivo-comportemental; Psychologie positive; Coaching axé sur la solution*

Cognitive-behavioural coaching (CBC) is one of the most widely used models of coaching within coaching psychology (Palmer & Whybrow, 2006; Palmer, 2013). It is motivated by the principles of the well-established and evidence-based cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT): that emotions are not caused by situations but by the way people perceive them (Palmer & Szymanska, 2007), and that the ultimate goal of therapy (or of coaching, in the case of CBC) is to help the client to develop autonomy and become their own therapist (or coach) (Williams, Palmer, & Edgerton, 2014). In this sense, the practice of CBC largely encompasses techniques focused on raising the client's self-awareness of their system of beliefs by identifying ways of thinking that may hinder performance and well-being and replace them by more evidence-based, logical and pragmatic beliefs. These new beliefs will drive the client towards their goals. Besides this work on cognitive reframing, experimenting with new behaviours that are capable of disputing negative thinking and of strengthening new, empowering beliefs is a signature tool in CBC.

CBC has been shown to be effective in a number of coaching scenarios: as a way to reduce unhelpful perfectionism and self-handicapping (Kearns, Forbes, & Gardiner, 2007); to tackle procrastination (Karas & Spada, 2009); to enhance relationship skills of sports coaches training children (Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979); for stress management and skill development purposes (Ducharme, 2004), amongst others.

Despite its effectiveness in such a wide range of contexts, CBC as a single approach has failed to conclusively show that it is capable of reducing workplace stress (Gyllensten & Palmer,

2005), although a subsequent RCT showed that a cognitive-behavioural and rational emotive behavioural self-help approach successfully reduced stress in middle managers (Grbic & Palmer, 2007). It has also been argued that CBC should not be used for a more in-depth investigation of underlying, unconscious motives and conflicts (Ducharme, 2004). Although this latter argument clearly calls for a more psychodynamic rather than cognitive-behavioural approach to coaching, we here suggest that CBC could benefit from systematically incorporating techniques from Positive Psychology (PP) and the SF approach to coaching (SFC) (for more details on PP and the SF perspective, please see box 1). Interestingly, Grant (2012) has already pointed out that a challenge for coaches wishing to underpin their practice in accordance with the cognitive-behavioural tradition is to utilise a language that resonates for coaching clients, a language that is not focused on fixing dysfunctionalities. We believe PP and the SF approach could be psychological perspectives that could actively contribute for the development of a more strengths-focused language within CBC.

Finally, the integration of PP and SF principles and techniques to CBC might also help CBC to be fully acknowledged as a psychological approach to coaching, and not as a type of therapy delivered to clients whose primary issues are not of psychiatric nature. Evidence for this lack of clarity on the fundamental differences between CBC and CBT can be found in reports such as that by Onyechi and colleagues (2016). In this study, there is apparently the use of a therapeutic approach to patients with type 2 diabetes and comorbid depression although it is referred to as a CBC intervention. This calls for a more accurate

Box 1: Positive Psychology (PP) and the Solution-focused perspective (SF)

PP: formally proposed by Martin Seligman, PP is a subfield in the psychological sciences especially concerned in understanding human optimal functioning. One of its principles is the view that people want more than fixing their weaknesses; they want to experience authentic happiness (Seligman, 2003) and well-being (Seligman, 2011). This would be achieved, for instance, by the identification of values and the use of strengths for the development of a meaningful and purposeful life.

SF: proposed by family therapists Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg (de Shazer et al., 1986), the SF approach is based on the idea that change happens when the therapist (or coach): works with the person, not the problem; explores what the client considers would be the preferred future; understands the client as the expert in his life; searches for resources, not deficits; works with the successful strategies that the client already masters but of which they are not fully aware.

understanding of the differences between the therapeutic and coaching modalities under the cognitive-behavioural approach, and the development of a clearer strengths-based language within CBC, as proposed herein, could be an important step.

Integrative models in Coaching Psychology

The proposal to integrate models in psychotherapy and in coaching psychology is not new. In the counselling context, most professionals blend elements derived from different approaches (cognitive, behavioural and humanistic) to form an integrated practice (Passmore & Gibbs, 2007).

A similar pattern occurs in Coaching Psychology. Palmer, Tubbs and Whybrow (2003), for instance, propose that the use of multimodal coaching applied to health promotion could render promising results. Moreover, not only CBC and rational emotive behavioural coaching but also multimodal coaching have been proposed as potential interventions for the prevention of mental health issues such as depression when applied in earlier stages of disease development (Palmer, 2008; Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008). In 2003 a self-coaching book underpinned by the multimodal approach was published focusing on tackling issues relating to stress, health and wellbeing (Palmer, Cooper & Thomas, 2003).

In addition, the use of cognitive-behavioural, solution-focused (CB-SF) protocols has been shown to be effective as a way to promote mental health, quality of life and goal attainment, as well as increase levels of insight (Grant, 2003). Furthermore, a CB-SF life coaching programme has also been shown to increase goal striving, well-being and hope (Green, Oades & Grant, 2007), as well as to be associated with increases in levels of cognitive hardiness and hope, and with significant decreases in levels of depression among high schools students coached by a teacher trained in CB-SF coaching (CB-SFC) (Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007). CB-SFC could also lead to enhanced goal attainment, increased resilience and workplace well-being, as well as reduced depression and stress among executives (Grant, Curtaeyne & Burton, 2009).

Another integrative approach to coaching has been proposed by Passmore (2006). In his Integrative Coaching (IC), Passmore proposes a model where coaches work with their coachees at multiple levels (behavioural, cognitive, and unconscious). IC strongly focuses on the coach-coachee relationship, whilst also being concerned with the coachee's behaviours and thinking (both in terms of conscious and unconscious thoughts). Here, we propose Integrative Cognitive-Behavioural Coaching (ICBC), a

model of coaching mainly based on the principles and pillars of CBC but which also acknowledges and uses tools and techniques derived not only from the SF approach (as already proposed by CB-SF programmes) but also from PP.

Integrative Cognitive-Behavioural Coaching: Definition and techniques

ICBC can be defined as a model of psychological coaching based on the principles of the cognitive-behavioural approach but which also actively acknowledges and utilises principles and techniques derived from PP and the SF approach; it therefore works towards the identification of values and the enhancement of authentic strengths for an experience of being that is more meaningful and purposeful. In this sense, ICBC practice would be characterised and inspired by:

– **PP:** the ICB coach will undertake a thorough assessment of strengths and values of the client with the ultimate aim of helping them to flourish by establishing goals that will lead them towards what they authentically consider to be a meaningful and purposeful life. The PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) can be used here. According to this approach, five key elements contribute to well-being and could be areas to explore in ICBC: Positive emotions; Engagement; Meaning, and Accomplishment. Also based on PP, the ICB coach will encourage the client to experiment with exercises aimed at enhancing positive emotions and developing strengths, such as: the kindness exercise, the gratitude letter (or gratitude journal, also known as the what-went-well exercise), and the forgiveness letter (Seligman, 2011); engaging signature strengths into activities that create flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) and/or activities that are related to what the client would consider as part of a greater good (Seligman, 2003), as well as savouring positivity and connecting with people and nature (Fredrickson, 2011). Another PP-related technique is the use of strengths cards to open coaching conversations on the appreciation of strengths in the self and others. Furthermore, playful tools like the Lego® Serious Play® method are welcome and aligned with PP principles, as they help to promote creativity (Frick, Tardini, & Cantoni, 2014). Such tools also contribute towards making abstract concepts become more concrete therefore facilitating the client's understanding of problems and of possible solutions.

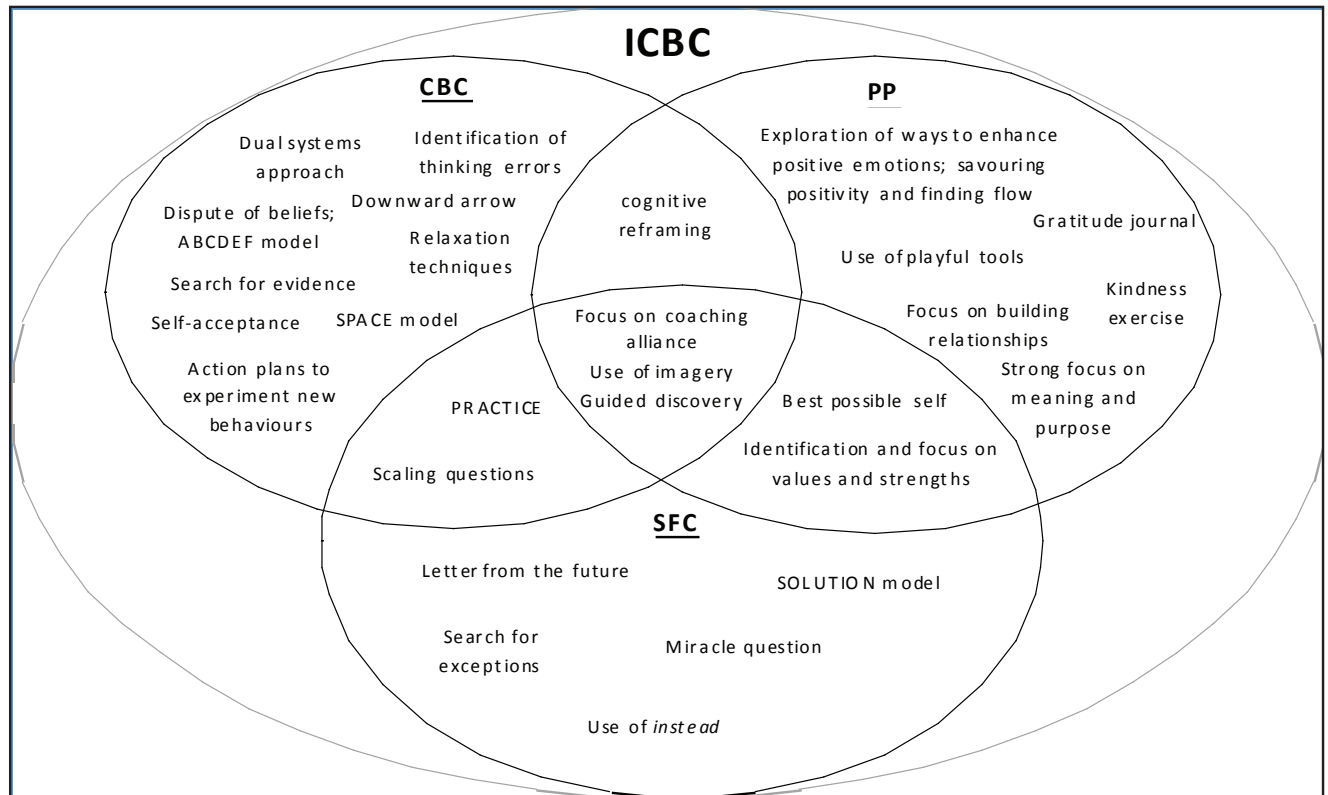
– **SF:** the ICB coach has a clear focus on strengths as opposed to deficits, based on the SFC idea that clients are resourceful (Greene & Grant, 2003). Moreover, the ICB coach helps the client to visualise and realise their best possible self. ICBC aims at guiding the client to uncover what is working (or has worked in the past) and help the client to apply these successful strategies

and resources more often. ICBC actively uses SF traditional techniques, such as scaling questions, the letter from the future and the miracle question (de Shazer, 1988; Berg & Szabó, 2005). SF coaching models such as SOLUTION (Williams, Palmer, & O’Connell, 2011) and the CB-SF framework PRACTICE (Palmer, 2011) for problem-solving are also included as important tools to structure ICBC conversations.

– **CBC:** the cognitive-behavioural idea that emotions and behaviours are driven by the meanings that people give to situations and by the views they hold about themselves, others and the future is a hallmark of ICBC. In this sense, the identification and dispute of negative thinking is a key technique for ICB coaches, especially when clients are struggling to promote change and achieve goals. Interestingly, the reframing of negative thoughts is also in alignment with the toolkit proposed by PP (Fredrickson, 2011). Considering the influence of PP and

SFC on ICBC, the ICB coach will develop a more solution- and strengths-focused language, trying not to convey the idea that the focus is on fixing problems and weaknesses. On the contrary, the main idea is that since clients are resourceful then they are able to become aware of unhelpful thinking and successfully and authentically challenge and modify it. Also fundamental for ICBC are cognitive-behavioural models such as PRACTICE (Palmer, 2007; 2011) and SPACE (Edgerton & Palmer, 2005), including their adaptation to other languages such as to Portuguese (Dias, Gandos, Nardi, & Palmer, 2011 [PRACTICE]; Dias, Edgerton, & Palmer, 2010 [SPACE]), Danish (Spaten, Imer, & Palmer, 2012 [PRACTICE]) and Polish (Syrek-Kosowska, Edgerton, & Palmer, 2010 [SPACE]). In respect of the latter, an interesting use of it in alignment with the PP and SF influence to ICBC is to ask the coachee to describe the different elements of SPACE in a typical situation where the coachee was at their best as opposed to

Figure 1: Examples of techniques derived from CBC, PP and SFC that compose ICBC. CBC = cognitive-behavioural coaching; ICBC = integrative cognitive-behavioural coaching; PP = positive psychology; SFC = solution-focused coaching.



a problem-related context. This could be a way for the coachee to become aware of signature strengths and facilitate their thinking on how to transfer the reflections about a successful situation to a current one where change is needed.

ICBC is therefore essentially about the integration of techniques and principles derived from CBC, PP and SFC. More details on how CBC, PP and SFC could inform ICBC are illustrated in figure 1. The figure depicts some of the techniques that are the hallmark of each approach (some of which have been mentioned above) and also illustrates where there is an overlap between approaches. Key traditional CBC tools used by ICB coaches are: the dual systems approach (Neenan & Palmer, 2000), the identification of thinking errors, the dispute of beliefs (such as by use of the ABCDEF model – Palmer, 2002), search for evidence, relaxation techniques, SPACE (Edgerton & Palmer, 2005), downward arrow, development of self-acceptance (Palmer & Williams, 2012) and action plans to experiment new behaviours. Some of the techniques from PP that could be used in an ICBC context would be: exploration of ways to use signature strengths and enhance positive emotions (joy, gratitude, hope, awe, serenity, interest, pride, amusement, inspiration and love – Fredrickson, 2011), savour positivity, dispute negative beliefs and build resources such as high-quality relationships (Fredrickson, 2011), find flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), write a gratitude journal and undertake the kindness exercise (Seligman, 2011), as well as use illustrative materials such as strengths cards, and playful tools such as Lego® Serious Play® (for more details on this, please see <http://www.lego.com/en-us/seriousplay/>). On the SFC side, some of the main techniques proposed to form the scope of ICBC practice are: the miracle question (de Shazer, 1988), the letter from the future and use of instead (Berg & Szabó, 2005), search for exceptions and use of strengths, as well as the SOLUTION model (Williams, Palmer, & O'Connell, 2011). Both original CBC and PP use cognitive reframing as a key technique, whilst PP and SFC have a clear focus on the identification of values and strengths (as opposed to fixing weaknesses) and on a SF-language to help the client to realise their best possible self. Both CBC and PP make use of scaling questions and of frameworks such as PRACTICE (Palmer, 2011) as a problem-solving technique. All three approaches – and consequently ICBC as well – make use of imagery techniques to visualise the preferred future and mentally rehearse new, optimal behaviours. Guided discovery is also used by all the aforementioned models as opposed to prescriptive methodologies.

Finally, a very important common aspect to CBC, PP and SFC is the strong focus on building a coaching alliance based on trust, ethics, empathy and unconditional acceptance of the client.

Research perspectives in ICBC

From a more practical perspective, ICBC could be seen simply as an option for coaches and coaching psychologists who would feel more comfortable with integrating the language and techniques of the three schools discussed in this article. However, if ICBC is to reach scientific and academic status and claim to be an approach in its own right, then empirical research testing ICBC protocols and programmes is paramount.

Inspiration can be taken from research reports such as that by Green, Norrish, Vella-Brodrick and Grant (2013) where a PP intervention (PPI) in school students was compared with a CB-SF programme and a treatment-as-usual control group. In this study, the authors found that the PPI led to increases in mental well-being whilst CB-SFC was associated with increased academic goal striving. Although more research is needed, especially considering that the results could not be maintained nine months post intervention, this can be very useful as a starting point for research in ICBC. Specifically, a possible research question would be: if PP can lead to higher mental well-being and CB-SFC can be associated with increased academic goal striving, could an ICBC protocol lead to improvement in both mental well-being and academic goal striving?

Research to validate ICBC would need to be designed to answer whether and under which circumstances ICBC would be effective in comparison to waiting list or attention control groups. These specific circumstances would include variables such as age group, educational level, type of coaching (if executive or life coaching), techniques chosen, length of sessions, total duration of the programme, among others. Moreover, it will be interesting to see if its effectiveness would be higher than that of traditional CBC, SFC, CBC-SF and PP alone.

In a previous publication, the need for neuroscience studies showing the coaching psychology (CP)-induced changes in brain functioning as a way to scientifically validate its practice has been highlighted (Dias et al., 2015). Therefore another point to consider comes from neuroscience: could it inform CP on brain areas and/ or on cortical patterns differentially activated by ICBC? Still in the context of neurobiology, research on the effects of ICBC on systemic levels of circulating trophic factors and cytokines could help us to achieve a better understanding of

the model and of the different effects it brings when compared with other CP approaches.

Conclusion

The use of integrative models of coaching can broaden the scope of possibilities for coaches and coaching psychologists in their aim to support coachees to become their best. Here we propose ICBC, an integrative model of CBC that uses principles and tools derived from a constructive dialogue established with PP and SFC. It is worth highlighting that the proposition of integrating the CB, SF and PP perspectives into a more unified framework to guide psychological practice has been made previously (Grant & Palmer, 2015); this paper therefore aimed to reinforce and formalise this idea. Research on the effectiveness of ICBC informed by both psychological and biological measures is

warranted so that the approach can be fully validated and achieve an academic status. ■

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