

Summaries of 2015 ACPA Mental Health Related Presentations

Developing Student Success: Positive Psychology Based Life Coaching for Students

Presenter: Larry Marks, Ph.D.

The purpose of this program was to provide an introduction to life coaching, describe the connections between positive psychology, coaching, and student success, and discuss how coaching can take place on campus. Strategies and research related to working with students on achieving goals and increasing well-being were included to demonstrate the value of coaching on campus, and to offer practical applications involved in the coaching process for attendees use when working with students on their campuses.

Students enter college with dreams of developing personal and professional success, and look to the college faculty and staff to educate them in how to achieve these goals. The science of positive psychology examines factors that lead to success, and life coaching provides an excellent means of using positive psychology to develop student success. Life coaching as an area of practice and research has experienced tremendous growth over the past 15-20 years, but only recently has coaching found its way onto the college campus, and usually in the form of "academic coaching." Life coaching may include goals of improving academic outcomes, but is much broader, aiming to help students achieve a variety of personal goals, improve performance, and thrive in college.

Positive psychology is the scientific study of factors that allow individuals, communities, and institutions to flourish (Seligman, 2011). This aim is congruent with the focus on developing talent and potential that defines higher education. Encouraging students' flourishing through positive psychology strategies supports higher education institutions' goals of creating opportunities for success, supporting academic and personal achievement, and developing well-rounded, high functioning students.

Research in positive psychology informs us that greater student well-being is a vital key to success and achievement in college and beyond (Achor, 2010; Boehm & Lyubomirsky 2008; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener 2005). Individuals' self-rating of their overall well-being has been associated with a number of positive effects including greater learning, productivity, high quality social relationships, and resiliency (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Pavot & Diener, 2004).

Life coaching involves a collaborative professional relationship between a coach and the individual being coached, with the focus on facilitating the individual's pursuit of personal and professional growth, specific goals, improving performance, and/or enhancing well-being. Having a life coach allows students to pursue their goals with greater clarity, helps them stay on course, and provides the support to stretch further in achieving their goals. A growing body of research has demonstrated that life coaching leads to improved outcomes including increased well-being and goal attainment (Grant, Cavanagh, Parker, & Passmore, 2010).

There is a natural fit between life coaching and positive psychology. Linley, Joseph, Maltby, Harrington, and Wood (2009) identified four aspects of both fields that create this synergy. First, positive psychology and life coaching both focus on enhancing performance and well-being. Second, by giving attention to factors that contribute to success and achievement, both diverge in the same manner from traditional psychological views that tend to focus more on dysfunctional systems and behaviors. Third, positive psychology's identification of and attention to personal strengths provides a tool that makes coaching toward goal achievement more effective. And fourth, positive psychology offers research based support for various coaching interventions. Furthermore, life coaching using positive psychology based strategies is well-received by most students as the approach is often experienced as uplifting, encouraging, and motivating.

References

- Achor, S. (2010). *The happiness advantage: The seven principles of positive psychology that fuel success and performance at work*. New York: Crown Business.
- Boehm, J. K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). Does happiness promote career success? *Journal of Career Assessment*, 16, 101-116.
- Diener, E., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2008). *Happiness: Unlocking the mysteries of psychological wealth*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Grant, A. M., Cavanagh, M. J., Parker, H. M., & Passmore, J. (2010). The state of play in coaching today: A comprehensive review of the field. In G. P. Hodgkinson, & J. K. Ford (Eds.), *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology* (Volume 25, pp. 126-167). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Linley, P. A., Joseph, S., Maltby, J., Harrington, S. & Wood, A. M. (2009). Positive psychology applications. In S. J. Lopez, & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 35-47). New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Lyubomirsky, S., King, L., & Diener, E. (2005). The benefits of frequent positive affect: Does happiness lead to success? *Psychological Bulletin*, 6, 803-855.

Pavot, W., & Diener, E. (2004). Findings on subjective well-being: Applications to public policy, clinical interventions, and education. In P. A. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds.), *Positive psychology in practice* (pp. 679-692). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York: Free Press.