

# Towards a unified theory of Positive Psychology Coaching?



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**COACHING & SUPERVISION  
TRAINING & SPEAKING  
EXISTENTIAL LEADERSHIP**

**I'm a coach**



# I'm a Positive Psychology Coach



**My coaching is  
grounded in / informed by / equipped with  
positive psychology  
(tools, theories, interventions, models)**



**Why**



“At present, there is no single agreed definition of Positive Psychology Coaching, and even the terminology varies.”



van Nieuwerburgh, Barr, Fouracres, Moin,  
Brown, Holden, Lucey & Thomas (2021)



For positive psychological coaching to distinguish itself from other approaches to coaching and **to develop its own identity** within science, **there need to be an objective, systematically developed and organized body of knowledge** supporting such. This knowledge should be available for other researchers to utilize, implement, validate, evaluate, critique, and update in an objective and systematic manner. **The bases of such a body of knowledge starts with a widely accepted and standardized definition of the concept** (Creswell, 2013).”



# Coaching & Positive Psychology

- “Coaching and positive psychology are **natural partners.**” (Kauffman & Scoular, 2004)
- “Coaching is the **natural ally** of positive psychology” (Boniwell, 2006)
- “Coaching is the natural choice for being **the applied arm** of Positive Psychology” (Biswas Diener, 2010)
- “**The science at the heart of coaching**” (Kaufmann, et al. 2010)
- “**Need for closer collaboration and integration** between the two professions.” (Linley & Harrington, 2007)



**Science!**



## Biswas-Diener (2020)

**“Positive psychology coaching,** like its conceptual cousin, coaching psychology, **prioritizes science as a method of inquiry.** In theory, this means that the results from such research are superior to opinion, pseudo-science, and anecdotal evidence because science allows for:

- better generalization of results
- better understanding of causal mechanisms
- better confidence in findings through replication
- better updates to practice as new insights emerge.”



## The issue

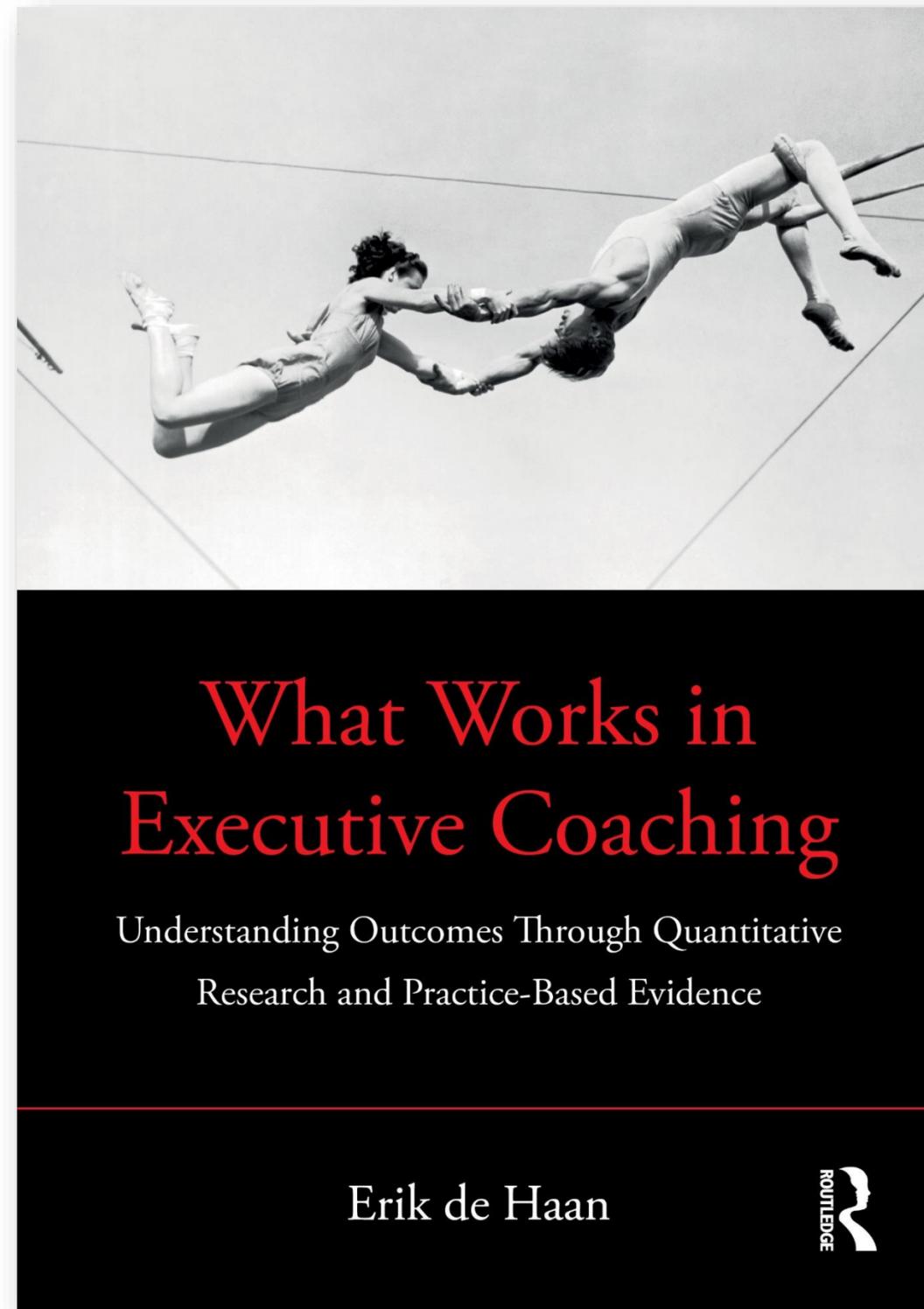
“The **lack of both a clearly articulated definition and a** process-orientated positive psychological coaching **methodology/framework/model**, leads some to believe that such is a product of pseudo-science, or that it is another victim of the jangle fallacy (i.e., the assumption that it may be an old concept in a proverbially new jacket; Wong and Roy, 2017; Compton and Hoffman, 2019; Yakushko, 2019).”



**We really need more data!**



— We need this  
for PPC!



**Y** | **ROCKET  
SUPERVISION**



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**In order to measure outcome  
we need to define the approach**



# State of play in conceptualizing PPC





"positive psychology coaching" +definition



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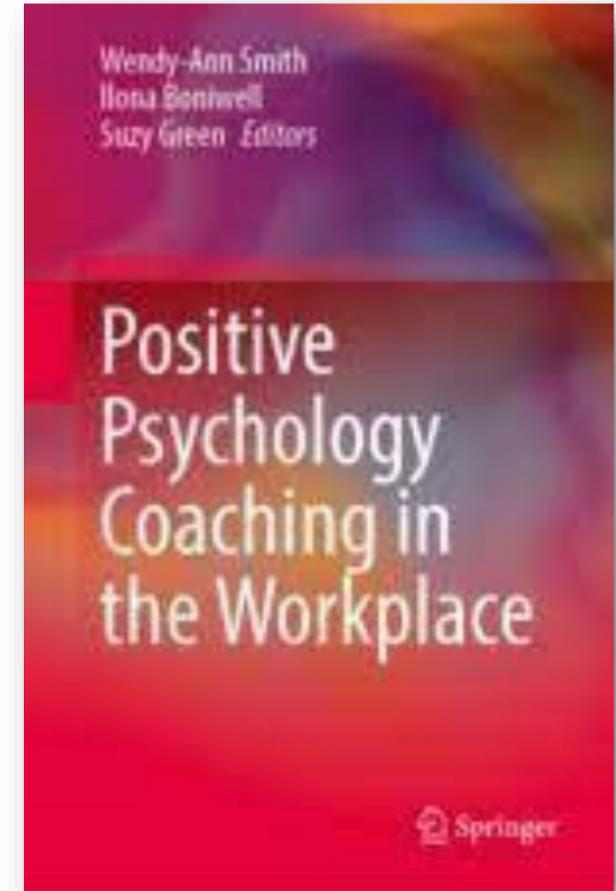
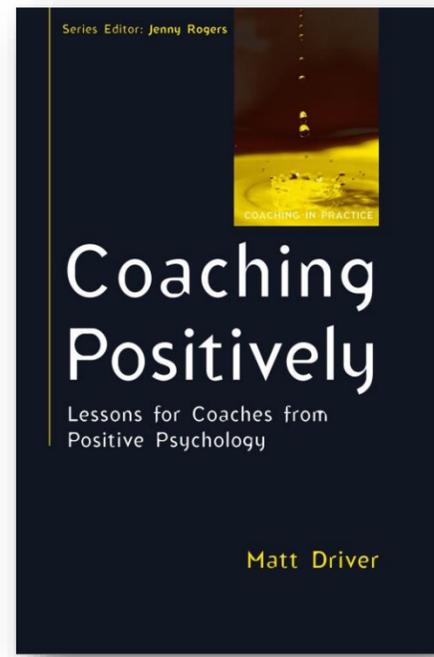
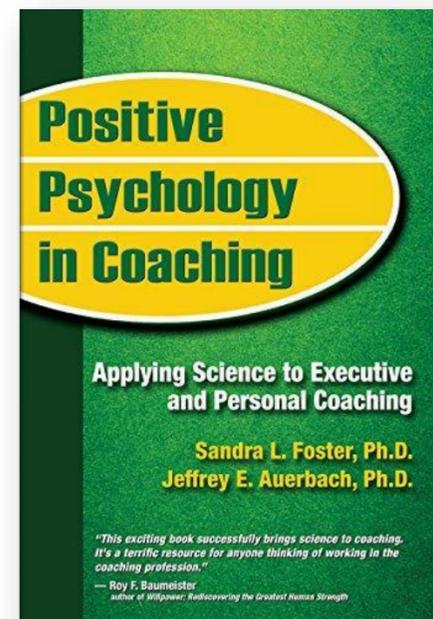
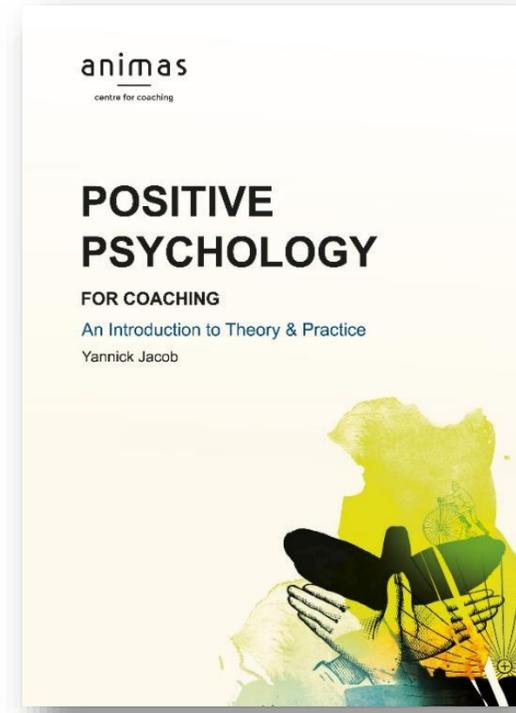
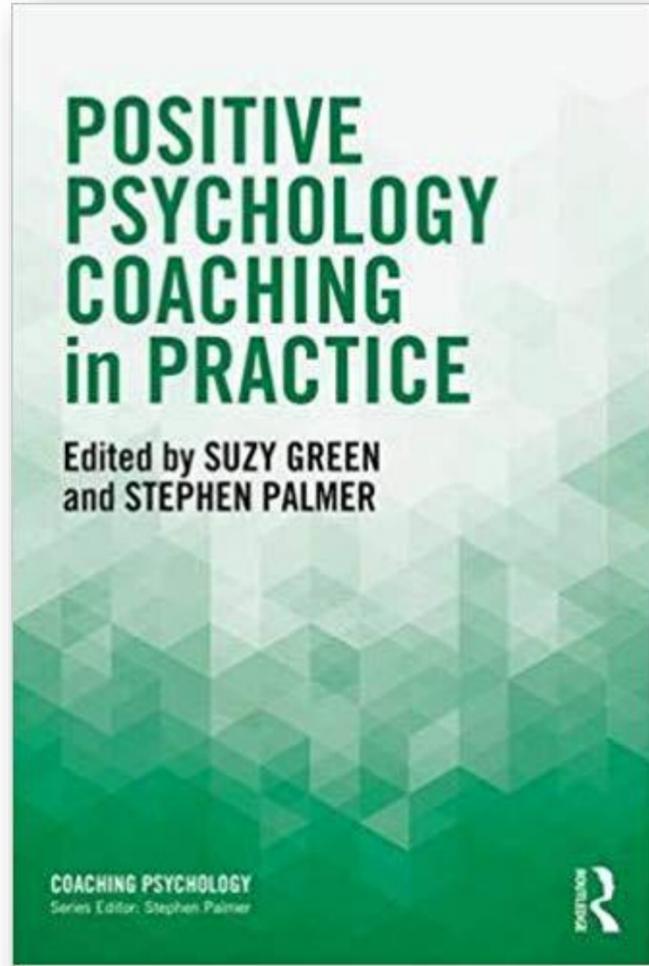
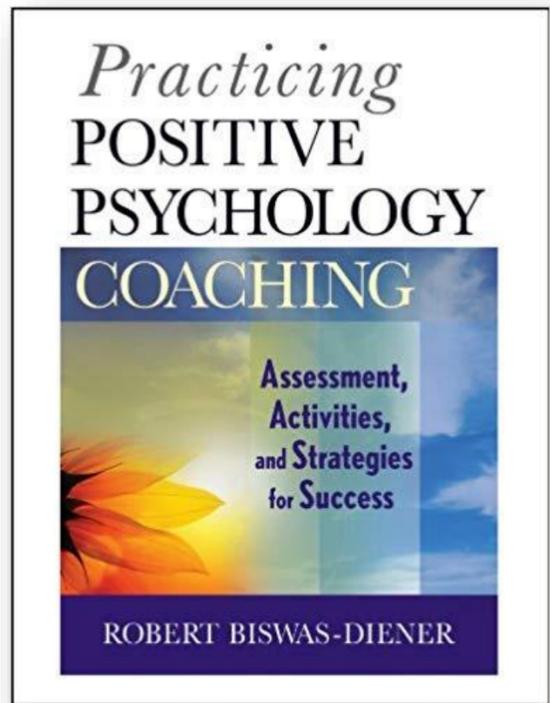
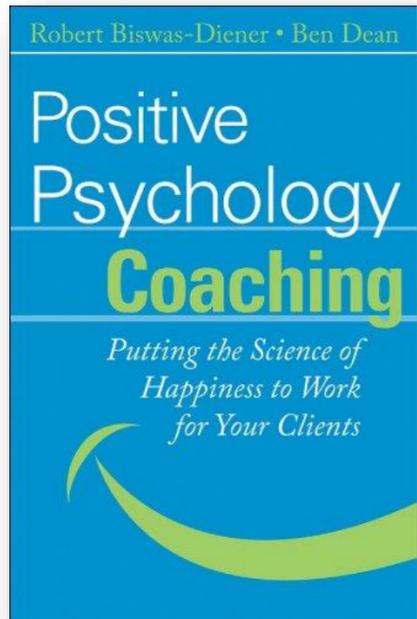
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# Book publications to date



# 1 min literature review



## Seligman (2007)

“Positive Psychology can provide coaching with a delimited scope of practice, with **interventions and measurements** that work, and with a view of adequate qualifications to be a coach.”

## Seligman (WBECS 2021)

“In psychoanalysis and clinical psychology, the only goal is not to suffer. There’s a new goal, and coaching is right at the heart of it: **Wellbeing**.”

The important thing about wellbeing that wasn’t there 30 years ago, is that it’s measurable. You can **measure wellbeing** and changes in the wellbeing of your clients.



## Kauffman (2006)

“The heart of positive psychology, like coaching, lies in the practitioner’s choice to shift attention away from pathology and pain and direct it toward a clear-eyed concentration on **strength, vision, and dreams.**”



## Biswas-Diener & Dean (2007)

“One of the most important aspects of coaching from a positive psychology perspective is the focus on **strengths** and the harnessing of the power of **positivity**.

The other signature trait of positive psychology coaching is a preference for using **evidence-based** approaches and a **systematic method** for gauging success.”



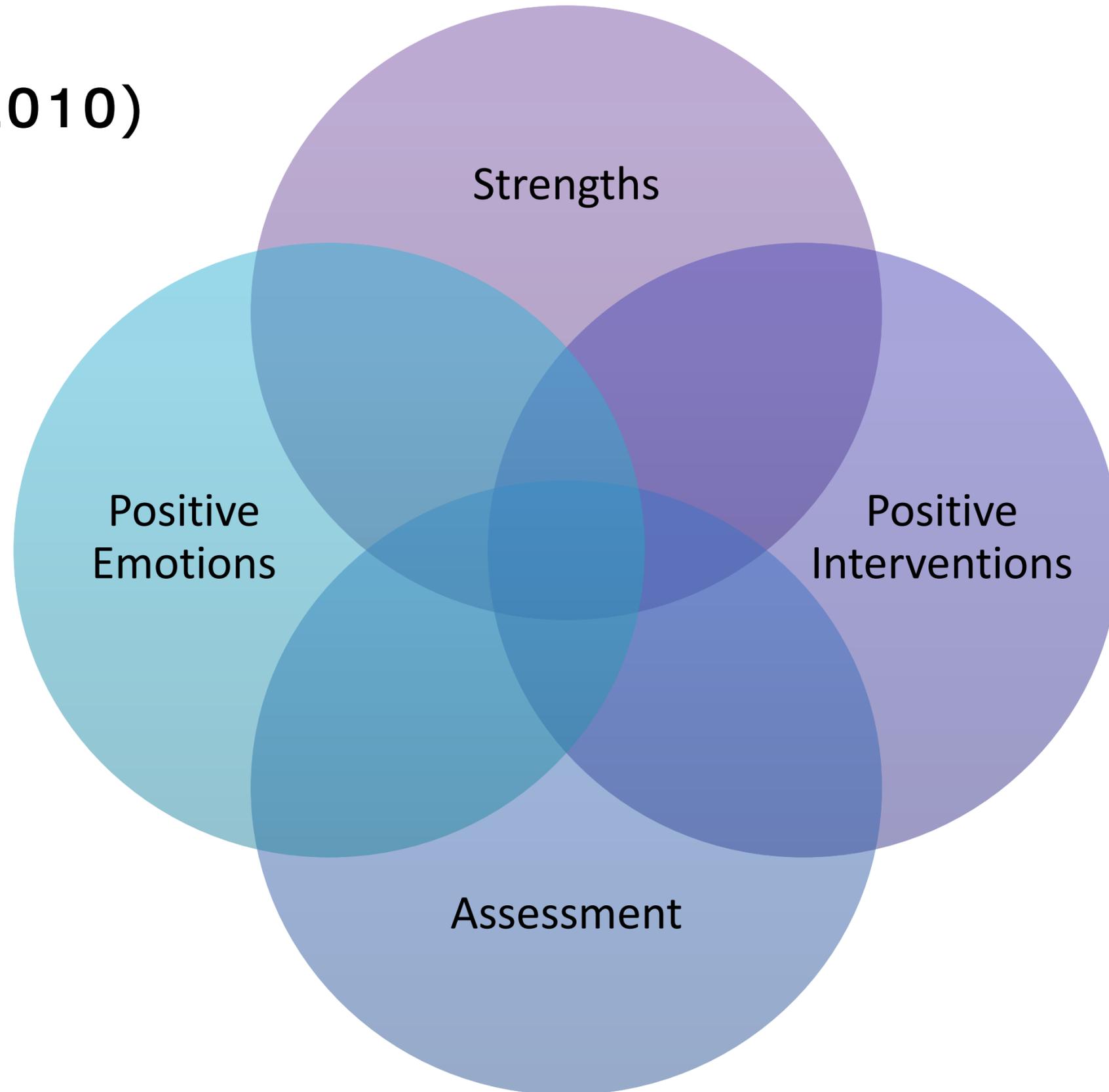
## Biswas-Diener (2010)

“PPC is **best framed as having basic tenets** rather than a complex functional model of its inner workings:

- Humans have an innate drive to grow, change and overcome.
- Focusing on strengths is as powerful, or more powerful, than focusing on weaknesses to achieve success.
- Positivity – whether in the form of emotion or hope – is a powerful resource for facilitating change and achieving success.
- Attention must be paid to both positive and negative aspects of life in order to address the complete client.
- Scientifically derived knowledge and assessment give us unique ways of understanding clients and coaching.”



**Biswas-Diener (2010)**



— Kauffman (2009); Kauffman, Boniwell & Silberman (2010, 2014)

“A scientifically rooted approach to helping clients increase **well-being**,  
enhance and apply **strengths**, improve **performance** and achieve **valued goals**”



## Passmore & Oades (2014)

“We have defined PPC as: coaching approaches that seek to improve **short term wellbeing** (i.e. hedonic wellbeing) **and sustainable wellbeing** (i.e. eudaimonic wellbeing) using **evidence-based approaches** from positive psychology and the science of wellbeing- and enable the person to do this in an **on-going manner** after coaching has completed.”

**Strengths + Broaden&Build + Self-determination + PERMA**



— van Nieuwerburgh & Oades (2017)

“A shared focus on **unlocking potential**, building on people’s **strengths**, enhancing subjective **wellbeing** and supporting **sustainable optimal functioning**.”

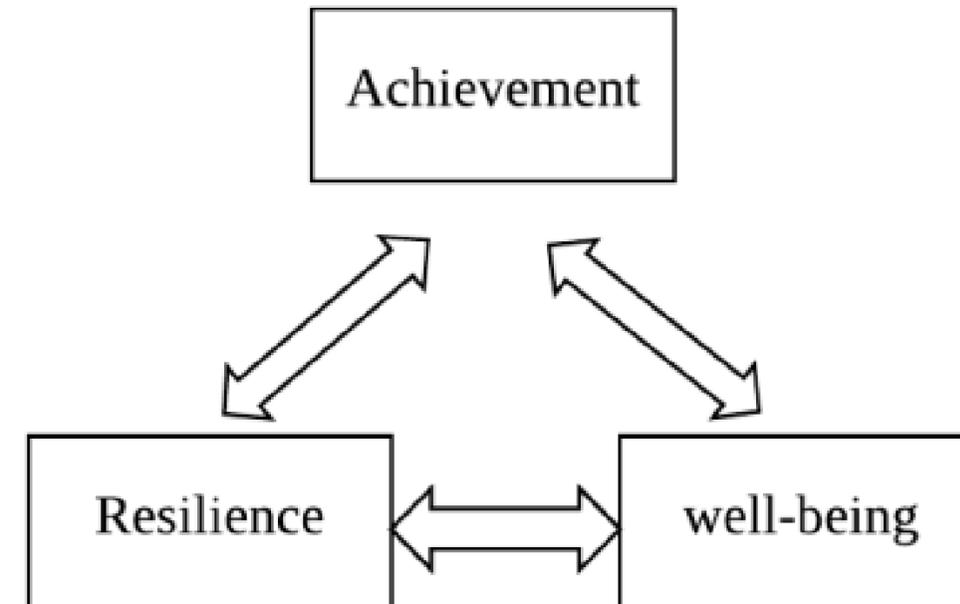


## Green & Palmer (2014, 2018)

“Positive psychology coaching is an **evidence-based** coaching practice informed by theories and research of positive psychology for enhancement of **resilience, achievement and wellbeing (RAW).**”

### The RAW model of Flourishing:

- Resilience → Clinical Psychology
- Achievement → Coaching Psychology
- Wellbeing → Positive Psychology



# Meta-analysis



# “Common” elements in PPC definitions

Element	Frequency (N = 94)	Percentage	Quotation	References
Identification, utilization, optimization and development of strengths and personal resources	19	20.21	"It focuses on helping clients to use their existing strengths to identify vision of what they want and turn it into reality (through focusing on) strengths, vision and dreams."	Kaufman, 2006
Facilitating personal growth, optimal functioning and enhancing wellbeing	14	14.89	"Coaching approaches that seek to improve short term wellbeing (i.e. hedonic wellbeing) and sustainable wellbeing (i.e. eudaimonic wellbeing) using evidence-based approaches from positive psychology and the science of coaching has completed."	Passmore and Oades, 2014
Directed toward enhancing positive states, traits and behaviors	12	12.77	"[...] enhancing self-regulation, insight, resilience, self-efficacy and wellbeing by facilitating the establishment and pursuit of self-concordant goals."	Grant and Spence, 2010
Collaborative relationship between coach and client	7	7.44	"[...] action-orientated collaborative relationship in which the coach is the facilitator."	Freich, 2013
Actualizing client's potential	6	6.38	"A process that [...] encouraged [individuals] to seek positive things in life, harnessing the best in people and inspiring them to live out their potential."	Freich, 2013
Utilizing positive psychological evidence-based approaches	5	5.32	"Coaching can learn from positive psychology about research and scientific rigor."	Linley and Kaufman, 2007
Working with well-adjusted individuals	5	5.32	"The client is already 'whole' and skilled."	Kaufman and Scouler, 2004
Socratic goal setting and achievement	4	4.25	"[i]t is a Socratic, future-focused, collaborative conversation between a coach and the client, during which the coach uses open questions, affirmations, reflective listening, summaries, and information exchange to stimulate and encourage self-awareness, personal responsibility, and behavioural change thought likely to lead to improved wellbeing outcomes over time."	Arntes and Passmore, 2017
Developing skills and capabilities	3	3.19	"Positive psychology applied to coaching [...] creates the conditions for skill and capability development beyond the usual professional activities, or beyond the prescribed area of organisational role [...]"	Castello D'Antonio, 2018
Focus on strengths not weaknesses	3	3.19	"They focus on strengths rather than on weaknesses and use a variety of assessment tools to explore character strengths, life satisfaction, and potential routes to peak performance."	Taragona, 2015
Active listening	2	2.12	"Positive psychology coaches listen for strengths and assets that a client may not be aware of, reflect back what is going right, ask questions that elicit images of better futures, and help clients define action steps supported by wellbeing theories."	Yeager and Britton, 2017
Clients have the capacity to develop	2	2.12	"Coach who believes in the client's ability to cope and change in positive ways, and who can identify, value, and develop the client's 'muscles.'"	Noble et al., 2000
Developing a personal vision (strategy)	2	2.12	"It focuses on helping clients to use their existing strengths to identify vision of what they want and turn it into reality (through focusing on) strengths, vision and dreams."	Kaufman, 2006
Take ownership of growth	2	2.12	"Taking charge of his own career development (ownership) and life-professional project."	Castello D'Antonio, 2018
Having a balanced view of the client's strengths and limitations	2	2.12	"A positive psychology theoretical base does not assume that clients are paragons of virtue or that everything goes smoothly."	Kaufman et al., 2015
Enhance professional development	2	2.12	"It is a relationship formed between a coach and the client for the purpose of attaining professional or personal development outcomes."	Grant and Spence, 2010
Aids in coping with work-demands	1	1.06	"Positive psychology-based leadership coaching also paradoxically assists leaders to grapple with the inevitable negative, toxic, or near-impossible demands of business life."	Kaufman et al., 2015
Continuous support	1	1.06	"[The coaching process helps clients] develop and implement solutions to ongoing challenges faced during goal striving."	Grant and Spence, 2010
Holistic approach to development	1	1.06	"[i]t is a well being intervention approach in which clients are taught strategies and skills aimed at helping them to identify, pursue, and fulfil their most cherished needs, goals, and wishes in sixteen valued areas of life said to comprise human wellbeing or happiness."	Freich, 2013
Short- to medium term relationship	1	1.06	"Strengths-based coaching is a short to medium term strengths focused developmental process aimed at harnessing the inner potential of a client in order to contribute to their well-being, and to seek out their potential."	van Zyl et al., 2018b

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Actualizing client's potential	6	6.38
Utilizing positive psychological evidence-based approaches	5	5.32
Working with well-adjusted individuals	5	5.32



## 8 critical components of a PPC model

1. **Strengths profiling and feedback** (100%)
2. Realistic goal setting, strategizing, and execution **centered around strengths** (91.6%)
3. Empowerment (66.6%)
4. Creating the relationship (66.6%)
5. Developing an ideal vision (45.8%)
6. Action tracking and evaluation (25%)
7. Learning transfer (20.8%)
8. Concluding the relationship and re-contracting (12.5%)



## — Van Zyl, Roll, Stander & Richter (2020)

“Positive psychological coaching can be defined as a short to medium term professional, collaborative relationship between a client and coach, aimed at the identification, utilization, optimization, and development of **personal strengths and resources** in order to **enhance positive states, traits and behaviors**.

Utilizing **Socratic goal setting** and positive psychological **evidence-based approaches** to facilitate **personal growth, optimal functioning**, enhanced **wellbeing**, and the actualization of people's **potential**.”



— **Biswas-Diener (2014, as quoted in Green & Palmer, 2018)**

**“PPC is not an endeavor distinct from coaching itself; rather it [...] includes “coaching as usual” – if you were to see someone do it you would see all the usual suspects; agenda setting, powerful questions, and accountability. But overlaid on this foundation of good coaching would be a series of interventions that are grounded in positive psychological science.**

Harnessing positive emotion, developing strengths, and increasing hope, for instance. And while these topics might seem **what all good coaches do anyway, a positive psychology coach is explicitly guided by dynamic research insights.”**



## van Nieuwerburgh & Biswas-Diener's (2021)

“A managed conversational process that supports people to achieve **meaningful goals** in a way that enhances their **wellbeing**.”

Using tools that have been **tested widely** and **informed by relevant psychological theory**, e.g.:

- Wellbeing theories (Diener, 1984; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Ryff, 1989);
- Strengths theories (Clifton & Anderson, 2001-02; Linley et al., 2010; Peterson & Seligman, 2004);
- Emotion theories (Diener et al., 2010; Fredrickson, 2001)
- Future Focus theories
  - Hope (Snyder, 2002),
  - Optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1992),
  - Solution Focused (Berg, 1994; de Shazer, 1985)
  - Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 2000).



## Boniwell, Smith & Green (2021)

“[T]o call oneself a *positive psychology* coach, it is **necessary to be familiar with some of the key theories** that underpin this continually developing field [such as] wellbeing theories, strengths theories, emotion theories, theories of future focus, hope theory, solutions-focused approaches [and] appreciative inquiry.”



## Boniwell, Smith & Green (2021)

“[W]e view positive psychology coaching in the workplace (PPCW) as the **blend of psychology** from positive psychology, coaching psychology, organizational psychology, organizational scholarship, neuroscience, education, and philosophy theory and practices **grounded in evidence-based approaches** with a focus on all internal and external organizational stakeholders in order to facilitate **positive mental health, wellbeing and engagement** for thriving workplaces.”



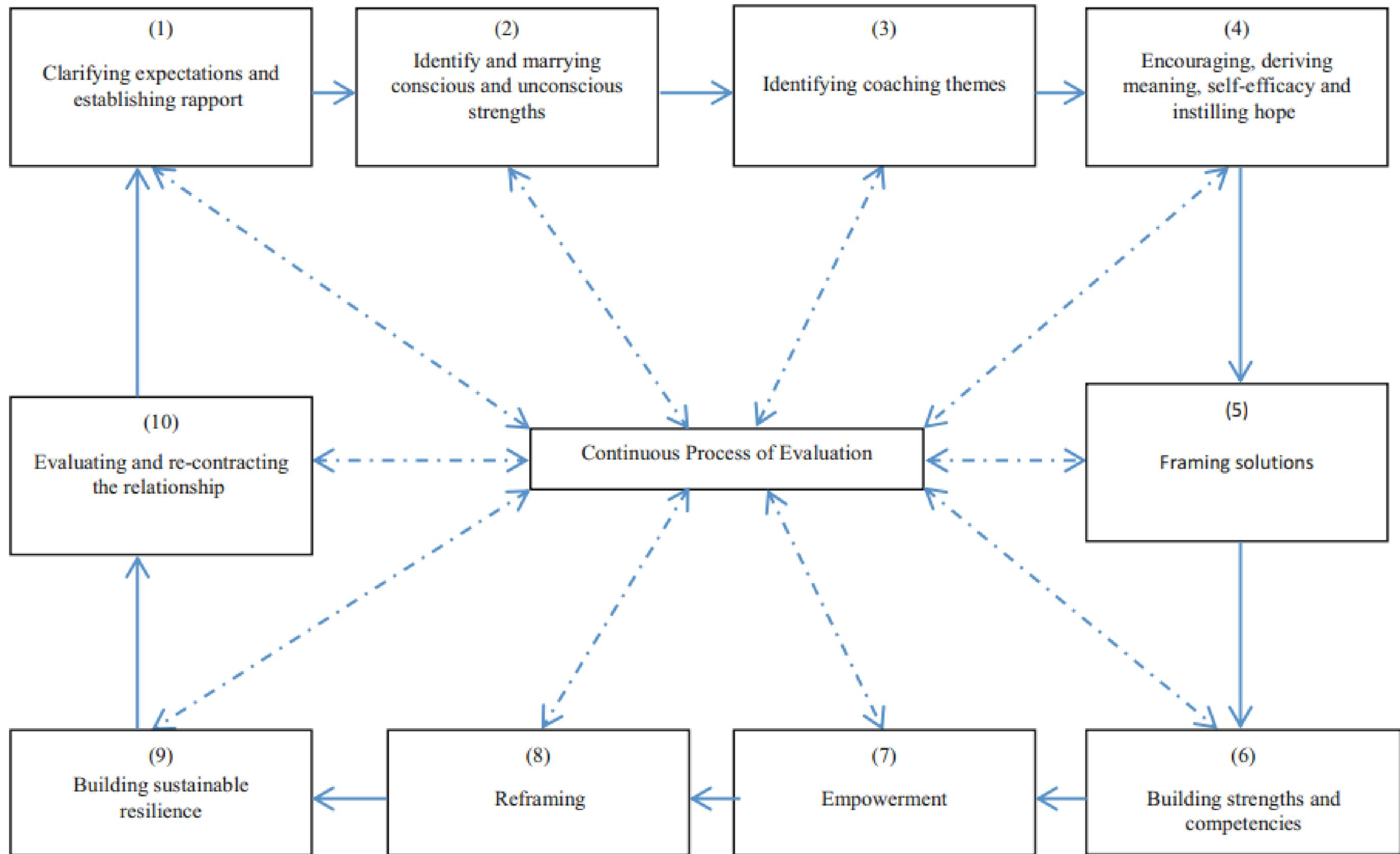
# Practice Models



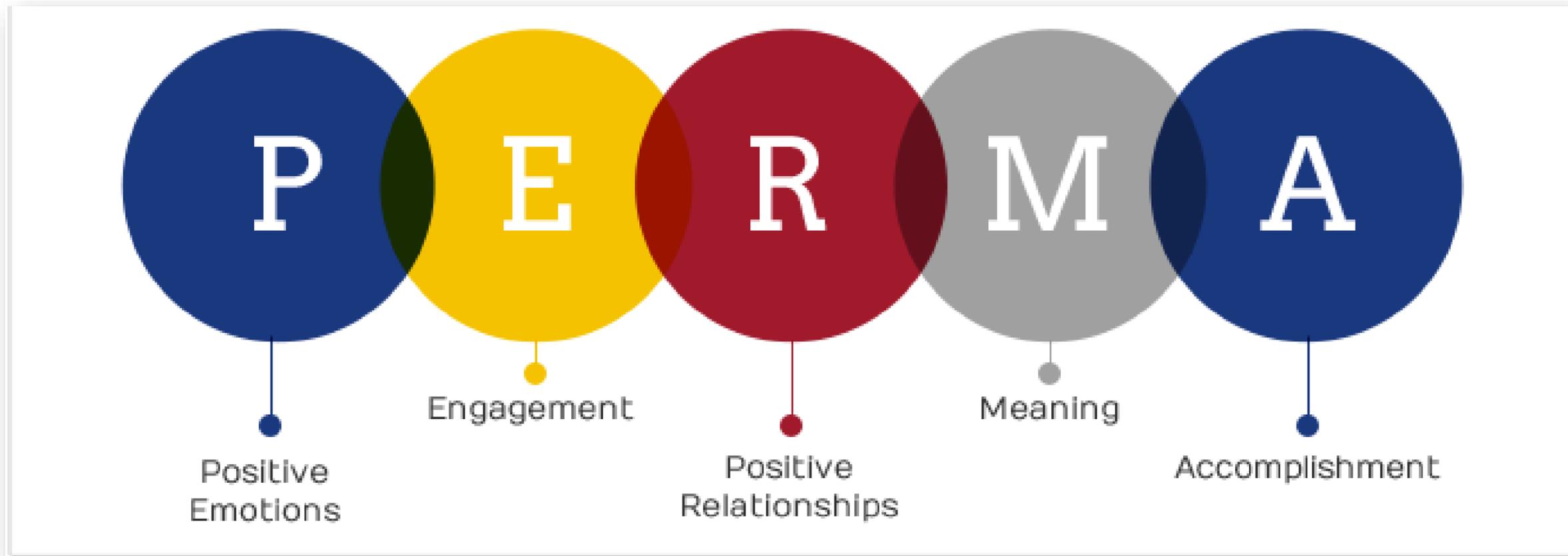
## Practice Models

- Appreciative Inquiry Coaching (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011; Gordon, 2016)
- Strengths-based Coaching (Dyess et al., 2017, van Zyl & Zander, 2013)
- PERMA-powered Coaching (Anstiss & Passmore, 2017; Falecki, Leach & Green, 2020)
- CHANGE Model (Wholebeing Insitute)
- Positran Model (Boniwell, unpublished)
- ...
- ...





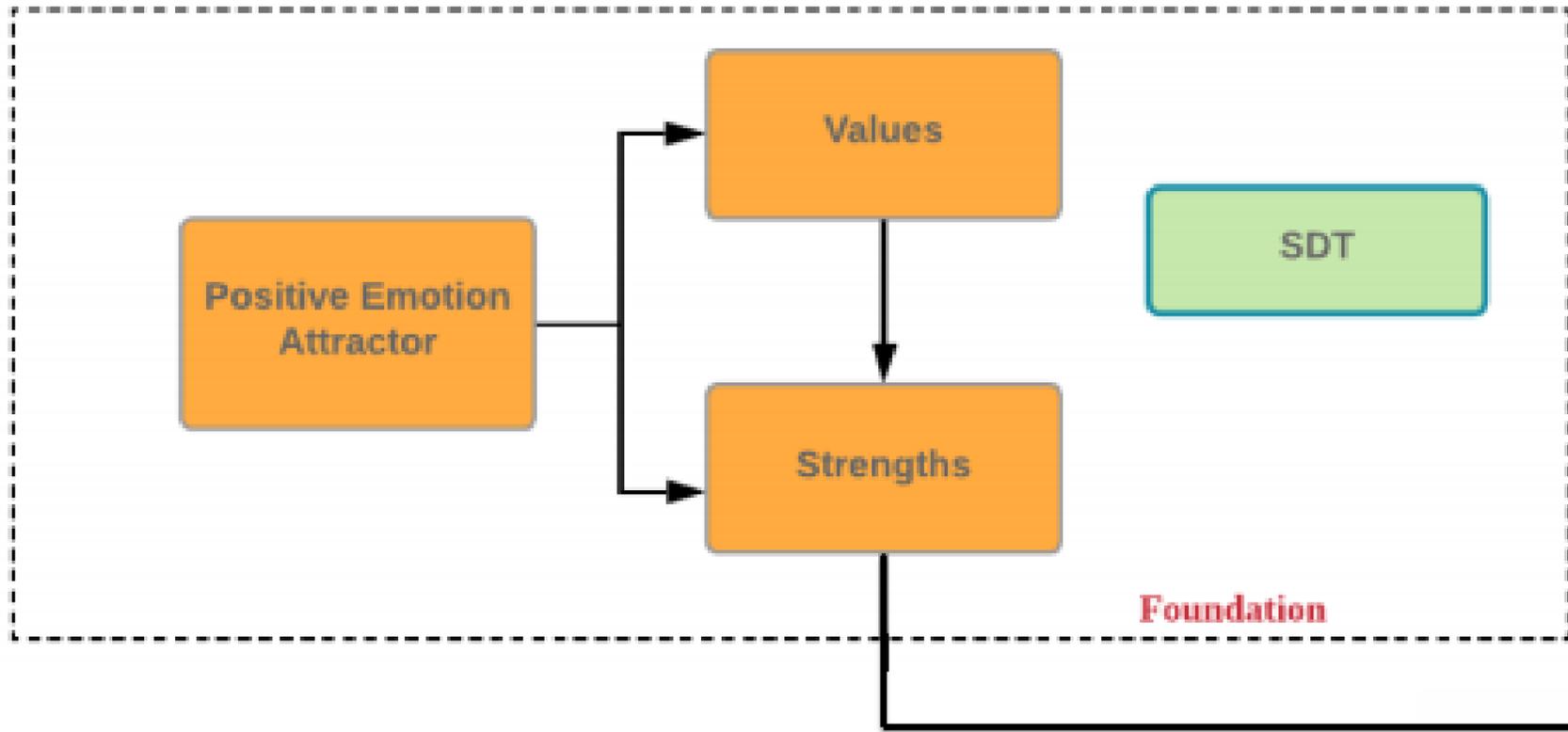
# PERMA-powered Coaching



# The CHANGE model of PPC



# Positive Psychology Coaching



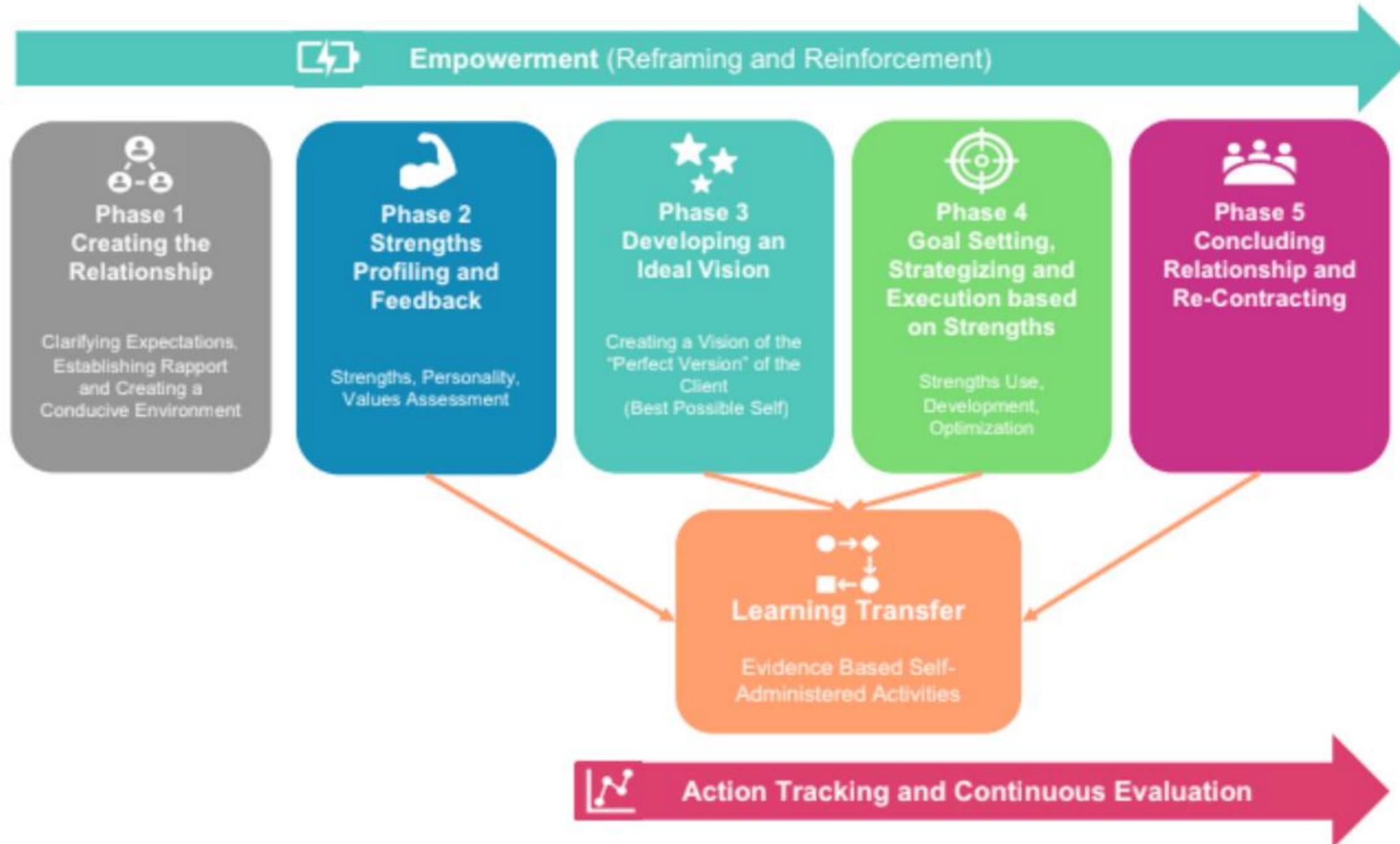
SDT: Self Determination Theory  
MI: Motivation Interviewing  
CBC: Cognitive Behavioural Coaching  
ACT: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Trust Relationship:  
MI, ACR,  
Emotional  
Contagion

(Wang, 2019)



# 5-Phase Positive Psychological Coaching Model



(van Zyl et al, 2020)



# Open questions



## Open questions

- What are the necessary characteristics of PPC?  
Method, process, outcome, toolbox, mindset, underlying theory?
- In practice, how can we tell coaching and positive psychology coaching apart?
- What's the added benefit of making distinctions in a necessarily integrative practice?
- If we claim to be evidence-based, we need more evidence!  
→ What works in PPC?



## Open questions

- What are we measuring? PPC or a particular coach delivering their version of PPC?
- Does PPC necessarily focus on wellbeing?
- Do we need “independent researchers”?  
Do researching coaches have a conflict of interest?



## Open questions

- Is it even desirable to have a unified model?



# The underlying challenge: What is Coaching?



# Research issues



# Terminology issues



**A way forward?**  
**→ coaches and practitioners**  
**and researchers to collaborate**



Like PP & CP – let's build links between PPCs & PP researchers

## A Perfect Match

Suggestions for fostering a blending of coaching and positive psychology:

- 1** Open dialogue between coaches and positive psychologists so that the former can keep current with new directions in positive psychological science. This may mean subscribing to positive psychology journals, joining positive psychology list serves or attending positive psychology conferences.
- 2** Create direct relationships between these two groups so that coaches can provide opportunities for new positive psychology research and psychologists, in turn, can help create new coaching ready interventions. This might best be accomplished by a special group, think tank or list serve designed to create individual cross-disciplinary relationships.
- 3** Coaches should be pro-active in creating professional standards for new niche practices such as “happiness coaching” and similar life coaching techniques grounded in positive psychology research.



**Now go and collaborate!  
That's what conferences are for**



# Towards a Unifying Theory of Positive Psychology Coaching – Yannick Jacob @Positive Psychology in Practice Conference 2021



#11

YANNICK'S  
COACHING LAB



Featuring a full-length  
**Live Coaching Demo**  
plus debrief, conversations & experimental breakouts with

**William Pennington**

Health and Wellbeing Coach - Senior Lecturer in Coaching & Positive Psychology

Eventbrite  
Meetup



#7

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COACHING LAB



Featuring a full-length  
**Coaching Demonstration**  
plus debrief, conversations & experimental breakouts with

**Clive Leach**

Coaching with positive psychology in business & education, frequent MAPPCP lecturer & published author

Eventbrite  
Meetup

## Positive Psychology Coaching in action

<https://bit.ly/CoachingLabMembership>

<https://bit.ly/FutureCoachingLabs>

<https://bit.ly/LabRecordings>

#6

YANNICK'S  
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Featuring a full-length  
**Live Coaching Demo**  
plus debrief, conversations & experimental breakouts with

**Catherine Bell**

6-figure Strengths Coach, Speaker & Consultant

Eventbrite  
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#19

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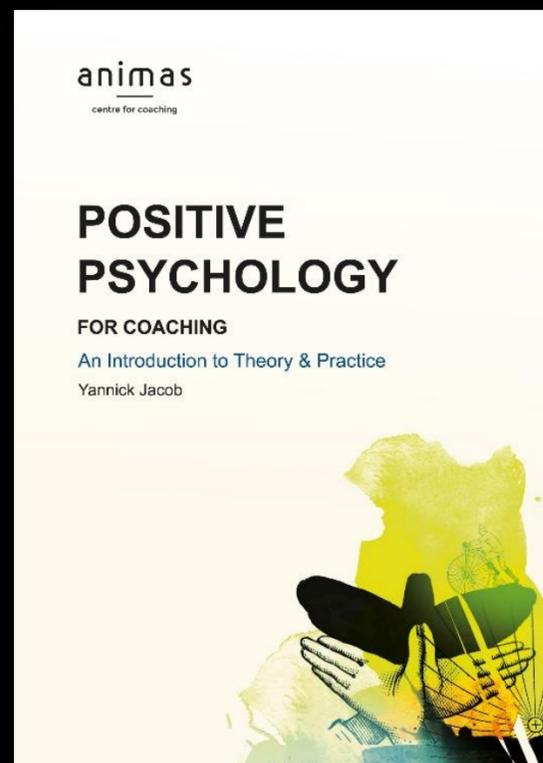
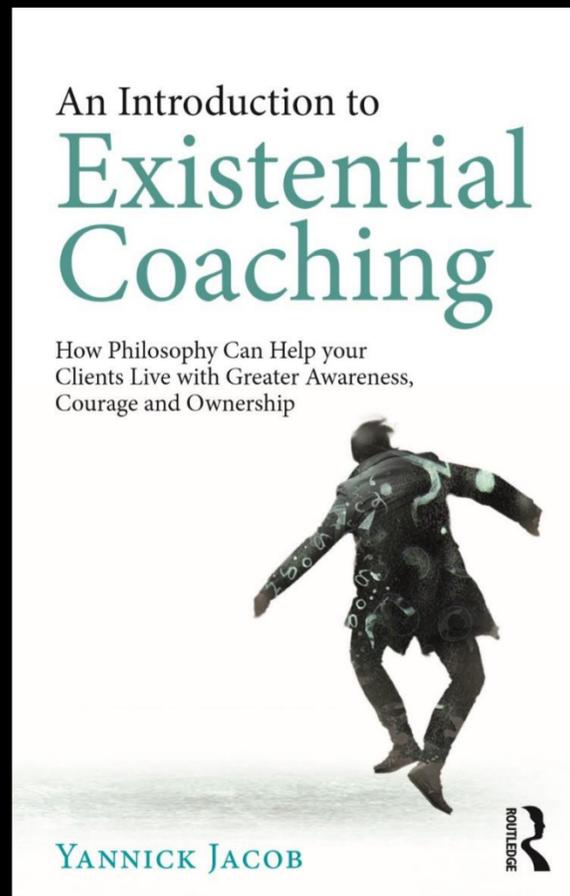
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plus debrief, conversations & experimental breakouts with

**Oriana Tickell**

ICF & EMCC Executive Coach, Positive Activist  
Director of Coaching Programs and Science of Happiness at Work @iOpener Institute

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