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## CHAPTER 8

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# Positive Psychology: The Science at the Heart of Coaching

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WHAT YOU WILL understand by the end of this chapter is how the new field of positive psychology provides a robust theoretical and empirical base for the artful practice of life and executive coaching. But first, what exactly is positive psychology, and how is it different from business as usual? Through the years, traditional psychology has focused on ways to help make ill people better by finding clinically valid and empirically supported methods to help fix things that are wrong with them. The mission of positive psychology is to develop sound theories of optimal functioning and to find empirically supported ways to improve the lives of ordinary and extraordinary people.

In this chapter the author will present a number of emerging trends in positive psychology theory and research and explore their applications to coaching. I'll walk you through studies of positive emotion, flow (accessing the zone), hope therapy, and classification of strengths. Each set of studies offers a rich resource of knowledge that can be mined for potential coaching interventions. The chapter is not an overarching perspective on the coaching process, as this is described in other chapters

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in this volume. Instead the focus is more narrow as we examine primary and secondary source material in positive psychology and invite coach practitioners to integrate what they learn into their ongoing professional practices. One model of applied positive psychology, Authentic Happiness Coaching (AHC), developed by the former president of the American Psychological Association and the father of positive psychology, Dr. Martin Seligman, will be described in detail. A process-coaching application of AHC with two clients follows.

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. Despite this intent, many coaches are still steeped in the culture of therapy and can find it difficult to transcend the medical model (Williams & Davis, 2002). A review of the executive coaching literature by Kauffman and Scouler (2004) suggests that practitioners still carry a deficit-conflict perspective of clients even when working with high-level executives. One aspect of this challenge is that most psychological language and nearly all assessment tools are firmly grounded in the mission of identifying pathology and problems. As a result we are steeped in a medical model culture and often aren't aware of how it forms the background of our thinking. The ramifications of this are enormous in terms of what issues are framed, how clients are assessed and what interventions are selected.

An explicitly positive psychology framework suggests that a language of strength and vision rather than weakness and pain be the firm foundation upon which the coaching work rests. Coaches with a positive psychology orientation also develop a different internal decision tree when selecting what material to follow, what to let pass by, and what cause-effect sequences to focus on. In essence, the clinician is trained to follow the trail of tears. If someone is dissatisfied with life, for example, a coach needs to resist the inclination to immediately hone in on client skill deficits or automatically search for signs of depression, anxiety, or emotional conflict as the true cause of the client's challenge. Instead coaches need to get their bearings by attending to how clients can use their existing strengths to identify their vision of what they want and turn it into reality. To follow this new train of thought, one follows different signposts and landmarks. In essence, coaches shift attention from what causes and drives pain to what energizes and pulls people forward. They follow the trail of dreams.

From the outset, I must emphasize that positive psychology is not interested in pretending all people are paragons of virtue, maturity, and

mental health. As you will see, for example, too much “positivity” isn’t good for you or your work team’s level of performance (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). We are interested in disseminating information that offers theoretical and empirical support to the coaching orientation of attending to client wholeness and strength. Of course pathology exists, but we tend to focus upon it exclusively. To illustrate this kind of shift, you may recall the famous gestalt picture of a black vase on a white background. When you reverse focus and concentrate on the background (instead of the vase), you see two profiles facing one another. One perception isn’t real and the other false, or a defense; both are equally true and each informs the other. Without the vase all you have is pale blankness, but if you zoom in and see only the vase, you lose perspective and imagine all is darkness. Coaches and clinicians need to learn how to shift attention back and forth as necessary (Lopez, Snyder, and Rasmussen, 2003). New research is even suggesting there is an optimal ratio of balance of how much you zoom in on the positive or negative (described below; Frederickson and Losada, 2005).

An additional challenge coaches face is describing how and why coaching is effective. Often testimonials and anecdotal evidence are used to support their assertions. Practitioners are often hard-pressed to have access or find theoretical, scientific, or empirical explanations to support their assertions of coaching effectiveness. The body of positive psychology research, however, indicates that a coaching orientation is an effective and valid perspective. *It is our belief that positive psychology theory and research will provide the scientific legs upon which the field of coaching can firmly stand.*

Throughout the twentieth century psychology developed an extensive technology to measure and address human pathology. There is now in the twenty-first century a movement toward developing equally robust assessment tools, interventions, and research methods to study human strengths and virtues. Lopez and Snyder (2003), for example, have compiled a handbook of psychometrically robust assessments of such “soft” phenomena as hope, optimism, and spirituality. Ed Diener, Chris Peterson, Martin Seligman, and others have also developed standardized, reliable, and valid measures of levels of well-being, strengths, approaches to happiness, life satisfaction, and more (see <http://authentic.happiness.org>). As a result we can now “diagnose” strengths, hope, optimism, and love in as precise and reliable ways as we measure anxiety or depression. Effectiveness studies of positive therapy (Irving et al. 2004) and positive psychology-based coaching are showing them to be very effective with sustainable impact (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

## RESEARCH EVIDENCE FROM POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY FOR COACHING

We now explore positive psychology research in four areas. For each one I'll describe some of the main concepts, offer a sample of research studies, and suggest possible coaching applications. The first area of theory/research is positive emotion and the surprisingly powerful role it plays in personal and professional effectiveness. Second I present the concept of "flow," the conditions that foster it and how coaches might use this information. Third I give a short overview of the components of hope and the effectiveness of hope therapy. Last is a description of the classification of strengths, the Values in Action survey (or as some have dubbed it, the "unDSM").

### WHAT ARE POSITIVE EMOTIONS GOOD FOR?: PASSING THE "SO WHAT" TEST

Positive psychology focuses on understanding how positive emotions work. It is quite reasonable to wonder, why bother? After all, many clients, particularly corporations, are going to want something that will impact the bottom line—why would they pay for coaching to increase happiness? The answer to this question is found in several streams of research in positive psychology. Fredrickson (2001, 2002) has developed an empirically supported theory that shows how positive emotions help us thrive. Her work examines the powerful day-to-day benefits of positive emotion.

Until now, most psychological research has focused on negative emotion, how we cope or overcome fear, stress, anger, sadness, disgust, and so on. Exploration of the positive emotions such as: joy, love, awe, gratitude, hope, or desire is now in progress. To begin, it seems clear that positive and negative emotions have very different purposes in our lives. Negative ones tend to ensure survival by galvanizing people into action when faced with life-and-death challenges. At those moments success requires an individual to have a narrow and sharp focus on the problem that must be solved quickly. In contrast, Fredrickson's research shows that positive emotions boost other psychological functions. For example, they empower individuals to open up their focus of attention, to "widen the lens" and see the big picture.

A series of studies supports Fredrickson's theory that positive emotions serve to "broaden and build" access to personal competencies (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). The research shows it is possible to precisely measure how positive emotions "broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to

social and psychological resources” (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). In the physical realm, positive emotions have been shown to: increase immune function, improve resilience to adversity, reduce inflammatory responses to stress, increase resistance to rhinoviruses, lower cortisol, and impact brain symmetry, and a number of studies show they predict longevity (see Fredrickson and Losada, 2005).

Positive emotions are central to psychological flourishing and have been found to have a significant impact on increasing intuition and creativity, and widening scope of attention.

They increase our capacity to use multiple social, cognitive, and affective resources and to take in an integrated long-term perspective—crucial skills in today’s complex world. With a moment’s reflection it becomes clear; positive emotions foster the very kinds of skills corporations want in their leadership teams and that our coaching clients would like to build in themselves. For example, positive priming of one’s emotions directly translates into increasing cognitive flexibility, speed, and accuracy. This pattern has been shown throughout the developmental spectrum, starting with preschool. One study (Isen, Rosenzweig, & Young, 1991) compared how quickly and accurately groups of internists made diagnoses of a patient with complex liver disease. Those primed to feel good (with a small gift of candy!) showed more flexible thinking and made accurate diagnoses more quickly than those primed to think humanistic thoughts or those not primed at all. Positive priming of one’s emotions directly translates into increasing cognitive flexibility, speed, and accuracy.

Another series of studies has shown that positive emotions have a powerful impact on how well work teams function and how this in turn has a direct impact on profitability. Losada (1999) studied 60 business teams and found that positive emotion played a primary role in how well the teams functioned. During strategy meetings, every statement was coded, and the ratio of positive (approving/supportive) to negative (disapproving/critical) was calculated. At the same time the positivity ratio of the 60 teams divided them into high, medium, or low performance in terms of profitability, customer satisfaction, and performance evaluations. The results are remarkably strong and show that the positivity/negativity ratio was the key variable that differentiated team performance. High-performance teams had a ratio of about 3 to 1 (three positive emotion or support statements for every negative emotion or disapproving/critical statement). The lower the positivity ratio the lower the level of function and effectiveness of the team.

When the researchers assessed the moment-to-moment group interactions, they found the high-performance teams had a much wider range

of behavior. Their discussions were more fluid and flexible. While there were more positive comments, there were strong criticisms and challenges as well. When negativity occurs in the context of high amounts of support and approval (e.g., ratio of 2.9:1) workers bounced back quickly after being criticized (Losada & Heaphy, 2004). In fact, pointing out problems or challenges served to ignite performance and inspire the executives to think with greater clarity and effectiveness. In essence, these strategy teams had the “wider behavioral repertoire” that Fredrickson’s theory would predict. In the groups where the positive/negative ratio was under 3:1 there was less resiliency and a narrower range of behavior. In particular, after negative comments, people seemed to lose creativity and authenticity.

The Losada research also refutes the notion that one should be positive all the time. When people get *really* positive team performance levels fall. It seems that if everyone is supportive and approving without a healthy balance of criticism (e.g., real reactions) the behavior range is constricted, just as was found in the highly negative groups. According to Fredrickson and Losada (2005) there is an upper limit of positivity. If the ratio of positive to negative comments goes above about 12:1 (11.6:1) behavior seems rigid and unresponsive. This is true with groups as well as with individuals. If one reflects on this information the implications for coaches are enormous. First, it suggests an ideal of being positive, and second a clear limit on how positive to be; in other words, you need enough sugar, but not so much as to make the relationship unpalatable.

Fredrickson examined positivity ratios with individuals and found very similar results. When she examined students’ month-long diaries, the positive/negative ratio seemed to differentiate those who were languishing from those who were flourishing. Subjects whose diaries showed an average ratio of 3.2:1 (a bit above the 3:1 ratio) or higher were doing much better than those at 2.3:1 or below. What bears notice is that the difference between those who are flourishing and those who are languishing was very stable, but quite small; sometimes just a couple of positive experiences a day swings the balance. This has important ramifications for life coaching, as it suggests that just a bit more positive experience leads to a very different quality of life. Research on couples found similar results. Studies used the positive/negative affect quality to predict (on the basis of three minutes of observation) which newlyweds would divorce (Gottman, 1994).

This confluence of data supports the idea that positive emotion plays a crucial role in life. While negative emotions serve to quickly negotiate life/death challenges, positive emotions are interconnected with the kinds of competence needed a majority of the time. This work also has

enormous ramifications for executive coaches, as it shows the importance of positive emotion and also the importance of grounded, critical thinking, and the most ideal ratio between the two. As such it provides an empirical, theoretically grounded model for optimal performance that can guide executive coaches on how to assist companies in management consultation, communication, and training.

In addition, it provides compelling, scientifically informed rationale with empirical support for why coaching, which clients often describe as a joyful experience, might have a very positive impact.

#### ROYAL ROADS TO HAPPINESS

The key question examined here is: what makes people happy, and is there a happiness “set point”? This is a basic research question that has important implications for coaching. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described happiness as very much in one’s personal control, “a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person,” while others suggest it’s inborn.

A series of national and international studies collected data on hundreds of thousands of subjects in order to examine what makes people happy. Ed Diener (2000) has pioneered the study of “subjective well-being” and examined national norms, comparisons among countries, different professions, and so on. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has also been exploring this issue for more than 30 years with thousands of subjects from all over the world. Together these two research traditions give us a fairly good idea of the contours and correlates of happiness. They’ve explored how happiness is (or is not) associated with macrosocial factors, genetics, chance, personality, behavior, and many other variables.

Implicit in the research are possible avenues, or even “royal roads,” to increased well-being. Research shows that our automatic assumptions of what brings happiness are often incorrect. For example, in contrast to the popular belief that attaining the American dream of financial success will make you feel good, this belief is not strongly associated with happiness. In fact, the reverse is often found, as in the case of lottery winners (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Diener (2000) and Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003) found clear correlations between a sense of well-being and having one’s survival and safety needs met, but beyond that there is a surprisingly low correlation. The usual pattern shows us that jumps in success have a short-lived impact that wears off as individuals acclimate to their new possessions or positions. This phe-

nomenon leads to what has been called the “hedonic treadmill.” Some studies indicate there is a negative relationship between materialism and happiness. For example, when you control for preexisting cheerfulness and parental income, having monetary reward as a primary goal has a negative effect on satisfaction with family life, friendships, and one’s job (Nickerson, Schwartz, Diener, & Kahneman, 2003).

People also assume that happiness is a response to what happens in life, such as getting a great job or finding or losing a spouse. While obviously big events do have an impact, if you study people over time, they usually return to their preexisting level of happiness (or unhappiness) leveling off after joy and rising up after sorrow. This leads us to a core issue: can one’s long-term sense of well-being be significantly increased or are we limited by how far we can rise? Diener (2000) suggests that people have a happiness set point, similar to the phenomenon of a weight set point. Events may shift one’s level of emotional well-being, but other homeostatic forces pull one back over time. Fujita & Diener (2005) examined this with life satisfaction, and about one-fourth of the study participants made significant shifts over 17 years; 10 percent shifted very significantly. Some suggest that happiness might be hard-wired in, but further exploration challenges this notion. Studies of subjective well-being of identical twins show, however, that only about half of the variation of happiness seems to be based on genes (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). Longitudinal studies show that over a two-year period, happiness seems to have a stable set point. However, if you widen the timeline and study people over four years, there is far greater variation (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003). These research programs on normal populations suggest that over the short run people do have a tendency toward a set point of happiness, but if you study them over time there can be significant shifts. Other authors suggest that since external factors (events, success, etc.) are not the key to understanding variation in a person’s happiness, we should focus instead on internal ones. In other words, it isn’t what happens to people; it’s how they construct and interpret those events (Schwarz & Strack, 1999). In light of the hedonic treadmill, for example, it might not be what you have that matters, but how mindfully you experience it.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR COACHING

The research on what does and does not lead to happiness has significant implications for coaching. First, it suggests that there is a role coaching can play to help people make upward shifts in their happiness set points. Second, remembering Frederickson’s diary studies, very small increases in



positive emotion can tilt the overall balance and lead to significant differences in the extent to which people flourish or languish. Third, the studies have implications for understanding the ephemeral impact of success and the so-called American dream. This last point bears a moment's reflection. What often surprises newcomers to coaching is that goal setting in coaching is often less tangible and concrete-goal driven than outsiders presume. Whitworth, Kimsey-House, and Sandahl's (1998) coaching text suggests that one always balance the client's agenda with a larger view of fulfillment that keeps an awareness of the alignment of the client's vision and values. A sweep through the research in positive psychology suggests that the coaching goals of "furthering the action and deepening the learning" are congruent with empirical findings on the nature of happiness.

#### WHEN TIME FLIES: FINDING FLOW AND A STATE OF GRACE

Emotional well-being is one road to what we think of as happiness. However, an equally powerful route is being "vitaly engaged" in one's life and grounded in a sense of meaning and purpose (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Seligman, 2002). For the past 40 years Csikszentmihalyi has studied the capacity to be a full participant in life. He describes optimal living as "being fully involved with every detail of our lives, whether good or bad" (1990, p. 2). Thus, he sees the capacity to fully take in and metabolize one's experience as core to psychological health. Using the "experience sampling method" (buzzing people at random times to assess their state of mind) on thousands of subjects, he has carefully assessed what people actually feel at numerous points in a day. As a result, he has been able to establish the conditions that generate positive experience. His primary focus has become the "flow" state, or as the French translate it, *état de grâce* (Demontrond-Behr, Fournier, & Vaivre-Douret, 2004). The experience of flow is when you are able to be completely caught up in what you are doing and time flies.

Flow, or "being in the zone," is often described as an elusive, spiritual state that is available to only a chosen few. In contrast, Csikszentmihalyi has examined the conditions that make flow possible for ordinary, as well as extraordinary, individuals. His research shows that a number of conditions increase the likelihood of entering a flow state. Coaches can learn and then tailor this information to help clients find their own ways to access this high-performance state. What follows is a description of some of Csikszentmihalyi's "conditions of flow" accompanied by examples of how to apply the information to coaching or peak performance training.

Imagine you are coaching a client—an executive, or an athlete—who is doing well, but wants to move toward higher performance. What can help?

- *Clear and immediate feedback.* Feedback keeps the performer centered in reality. To keep at peak performance one needs to know how one is doing in order to meet the demands being faced (e.g. racers knowing their split times). However, feedback isn't necessarily external; *inner clarity* seems crucial. For example, you hear athletes describe their capacity to self-reflect and incorporate performance feedback as they are in the midst of a game. *I could feel if it was right. . . . It's hard to explain. . . . I knew I had made the right move* (Demontrond-Behr et al., 2004).
- *Absence of self-consciousness.* In a state of flow the individual is so fully engaged in the performance that he or she can let go of "over thinking and over trying" (Jackson, 2003). Exercises to increase mindful focus on the present and detaching from the outcome may help athletes or performers transcend themselves. Clients report things like: *I don't know how I did it, I just did it.* Or: *I let go of winning and just went for it.*
- *Merging action and awareness.* A coach can help the client manage the dialectical tension between transcending the moment and also being completely aware of and flexibly responding to new information coming in at the periphery (Kauffman, 2005b). *It's like blinders that come and go when I need them. My focus opens up to absorb what's happening, then narrows back down.*
- *Sense of control.* In any challenge there are elements one can control and elements one cannot. Help clients to focus clearly on the first and defocus from the last. A motto the author asks clients to repeat regularly, particularly when facing overwhelming challenge, is: *I'm not in control of my destiny but I AM in control of my probabilities* (Kauffman, in press).
- *Intrinsic motivation/autotelic experience.* Flow comes when doing what you want. If it isn't automatically present in a task, help clients find aspects of the challenge that are intrinsically rewarding. A key intervention (the Authentic Happiness Coaching model, described later) is helping the client identify signature strengths and find new ways to use them in the service of the task (Seligman, Steen, et al., 2005).
- *Balance skills and challenge.* The optimal match between having a high level of skill and a high task demand is one of the crucial aspects that makes flow possible. When the balance is off you see the following: High challenge with low skill = anxiety; low challenge with high skill = relaxation/boredom; low challenge with low skill = apathy (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). To coach for flow, help clients find the right balance by either increasing skill level or decreasing challenge. The coach can help clients decrease

challenge by breaking the task into smaller pieces and building skills until they feel equipped to handle the task at hand. Alternatively, if the client is feeling untapped or bored, the coach can help the client find ways to make the task harder and expand the client's vision of the size and scope of the project at hand (Kauffman, 2004b).

- *Time transformation.* When in a flow state time transforms. For example, during a fencing match, a flow state heightens perception and the foils seem to move more slowly. Alternatively, a flow experience can feel like a wrinkle in time—hours go by in what feels like minutes. This one is hard to coach in a direct way, although laser-like visualization techniques can help build the perception skills. You can also have clients intensely recall past experiences of their own peak flow states to see if it becomes easier for them to replicate and access this state-dependent experience.

Those who apply Csikszentmihalyi's work to coaching executives, athletes, and performers also describe how important it is to adjust the external environment to support and enhance flow (Jackson, 2003). Jackson also emphasizes how the interpersonal environment is an important, if not crucial, factor in fostering flow during athletic or performance situation. The Frederickson and Losada work described above would support the idea that there probably is an ideal combination of encouragement and criticism/challenge that facilitates optimal performance. Sports psychologists also describe the importance of group support (Demontrond-Behr et al., 2004). Kauffman (2004a) emphasizes that multimodal resource training helps clients keep their foundation skills strong and increases their chances to have sustained flow states and "tap into turbo" for peak performance bursts. Clearly, the concept of flow and engagement has many potential applications that coaches can harness in their work.

#### TRIUMPH OF HOPE BASED IN REALITY

A key area that has received significant attention from positive psychology is the experience of having hope. Many dozens of studies have provided empirical support for the crucial role that hope plays in a person's life. High-hope (vs. low-hope) individuals enjoy better physical health and have higher academic functioning, interpersonal effectiveness, athletic performance, psychosocial adjustment, capacity for emotional self-regulation, and superior abilities to face and overcome obstacles (Snyder, 2000). When the highly hopeful person's progress toward a goal is blocked he or she is able to search for and find other pathways to the goal and maintain a sense of agency (sense of being able to act). In contrast, those low in hope tend to

become confused, avoidant or ineffective when they find themselves thwarted; see Snyder (2002) and Snyder & Lopez (2002) for reviews.

Snyder (2002) has developed one of the first empirically supported programs for an application of positive psychology, called hope therapy. Over the past 20 years he has developed a complex theory of hope; a reliable and valid test to measure it (Snyder et al., 1991); and empirically supported interventions that have been shown to improve hope in children, adolescents, adults, and elders (Wroblewski and Snyder, 2005). This semistructured or narrative approach is described in detail in Snyder (2002). While hope therapy works well on its own, it also can be joined to other interventions. A five-week hope training orientation program with clients on a wait list was shown to boost the effectiveness of subsequent psychotherapy regardless of whether it was behavioral or dynamic (Irving et al., 2004). When other psychological factors were held constant, it appears that increasing hopefulness, not the client's subjective well-being or level of coping skills, was a key reason for improvement.

Hope has two elements according to Snyder's theory, and both components can be strengthened by hope training. These are: pathways thinking and having a sense of agency. Pathways thinking means that when the first route you try is blocked, you can produce alternative routes to get to your destination. High-hope individuals can think flexibly and change or correct course as needed. Low-hope people are less flexible and a second or third pathway does not feel viable to them. Thus, coaching to increase a client's capacity to find alternate routes is a core component of having hope, which in turn sustains one's effort.

The second aspect of hope is to have agency, a sense one can reach desired goals. There are numerous ways to coach clients to greater efficacy, either by developing more precise and attainable goals or by helping them vividly recall past successes and solidify the cognitive/affective state associated with their individualized sense of "I can-ness." High hope individuals have both multiple pathways thinking and a sense of agency. One without the other does not foster maximum success. High pathways with low agency can surface as the client feeling: I know what to do, but I don't think I can. Low pathways with high agency appear as: I feel strong and ready but don't know what to do. Hope training can teach and coach people to develop both components of hope.

The power hope has on performance can be startling. For example, one study with female track athletes found that hope was the number one predictor of race performance (Snyder, 2002). When the authors statistically held raw athletic ability constant, hope still accounted for 56

percent of the variation in how well the athletes raced. The implications of these studies are that coaches will be well served by learning techniques to help clients become more hopeful. In turn this can have significant impact on the clients' capacities to regroup when faced with difficulty and to feel more empowered.

Coaches may find Snyder's work sheds light on explanations for the perceived effectiveness of well-known coaching interventions that, while not based on psychological theory, are in fact supported by it. For example, one familiar coaching intervention is brainstorming. From the perspective of Snyder's work, brainstorming is a type of pathways training—for example, "Let's think of five ways to get there!" An additional common practice in coaching is the use of positive affirmation and visualization exercises. These may help clients build a clear self-perception of "I can," or a sense of agency.

The famous wheel of life or pillars exercise is another case in point (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 1998; Dean, 2004). For this the coach asks the client to identify a series of life domains (career development, relationships, leisure time, etc.). Then the client rates on a scale of one to ten how satisfied he is in that domain. For example, a client rates herself as a 4.0 in her satisfaction with use of leisure time. The coach asks the client to describe in detail what that aspect of life would look like if it were a 10 and if neither time nor money were an issue (10 might be going to the Cannes film festival, yachting, skiing the Alps). Then the coach asks (and brainstorms as necessary) what the client could do in the next six weeks to become a 4.5 (e.g., go to three movies or attend the local film festival, check out community boating, and/or, in season, sign up for ski lessons). One can see how this type of exercise, aided by brainstorming and clear visualization, could possibly foster both pathways and agency thinking, particularly when paired with accountability and occurring in the context of a warm coaching relationship.

#### "DIAGNOSING" STRENGTHS

Positive psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman (2004) have developed a classification system of strengths called the Values in Action (VIA) strengths survey. The questionnaire measures human strengths in a consistent, reliable, and valid manner; to date it has been tested on hundreds of thousands of individuals. It has proven useful for researchers and coaches. It begins to create a clear way to identify strengths and serves as a foundation for psychology practitioners to reliably measure them, find ways to help individuals cultivate strengths, and have a way to assess changes over time. The Mayerson

Foundation has donated the VIA to the public domain, and it is available for free at <http://authentichappiness.org>.

The VIA classification of character strengths identifies six primary categories of strength (described as core virtues). Each of these has a number of subcategories, resulting in 24 potential signature strengths. After taking the test, individuals' strengths are ranked from the top five (signature strengths) to the least developed. Usually, coaches focus on clients' top strengths and help them harness these qualities. It is also possible to identify important less-developed strengths and bolster them.

The 24 strengths are organized by categories and subcategories:

1. *Wisdom and knowledge*: cognitive strengths related to accruing and using knowledge.
  - *Creativity*: thinking in novel, productive ways, with originality or ingenuity.
  - *Curiosity*: interest in experience for its own sake, openness to experience, finding things fascinating.
  - *Open-mindedness*: thinking things through, not jumping to conclusions, having good critical thinking and judgment.
  - *Love of learning*: enjoying learning and systematically organizing experience; also surfaces as love of teaching others.
  - *Perspective*: being able to make sense of the world to oneself and others, having wisdom.
2. *Courage*: emotional strengths that involve the will to accomplish goals in the face of external or internal opposition.
  - *Bravery*: not shrinking from challenge or pain; speaking up, standing up for convictions.
  - *Persistence*: finishing what you start and getting it out the door.
  - *Integrity*: presenting oneself in a genuine, honest way, taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions.
  - *Vitality*: feeling alive and activated, with zest, vigor, and energy.
3. *Humanity*: interpersonal strengths, tending and befriending others.
  - *Love*: valuing close relations.
  - *Kindness*: doing good deeds for others, nurturance, compassion, and altruism.
  - *Social intelligence*: being aware of motives and feelings of others and oneself.
4. *Justice*: civic strengths that would foster healthy community life.
  - *Citizenship*: working well with a team, loyalty, social responsibility.
  - *Fairness*: treating people equally, not swayed by personal feelings.
  - *Leadership*: encouraging your group to get things done while maintaining good relations.

5. *Temperance*: strengths that protect against excess.
  - *Forgiveness and mercy*: not being vengeful; giving others a second chance.
  - *Humility*: not seeking the spotlight; modesty.
  - *Prudence*: farsightedness; being careful about choices.
  - *Self-regulation*: controlling appetites and emotions.
6. *Transcendence*: strengths that provide meaning and connect with a larger universe.
  - *Appreciation of beauty and excellence*: notice and appreciation of nature, performance; able to experience awe and wonder.
  - *Gratitude*: being aware and thankful for the good things that happen and for life itself, accompanied by warm goodwill.
  - *Hope and optimism*: expecting the best and believing a good future is something you can help bring about.
  - *Humor*: playfulness, enjoying laughter, making people smile.
  - *Spirituality*: coherent beliefs about the higher purpose in life and connection to the purpose and meaning.

At first glance the list of strengths may seem overwhelming, but after coach and client become familiar with the test and its results, the information can be very useful for coaching. Identification of top strengths provides a unique profile of who the client is at his or her best. In turn this information highlights what motivates and inspires each client. One can make choices of how to select interventions that might most powerfully help clients in the light of knowing their strengths. For example: a client trying to work through a challenging situation whose top strengths are love of learning and open mindedness might benefit from a different set of interventions from a client who has the top strengths of capacity to love and appreciation of beauty. Coaches can also use their knowledge of client strengths to design more optimal relationships as well as individually tailor homework assignments. When clients learn to bring their strength to a challenge it helps them tap into their intrinsic motivations and can help them improve performance and find more satisfaction in the task accomplishment.

There is strong empirical evidence that supports the effectiveness of working with clients' signature strengths. For example, in one exercise (described later) people were asked to use their top strengths in new ways for one week (vs. a placebo exercise). The results showed that those who worked with their strengths in new ways were happier, less depressed, and more engaged in their lives than those in the control group. The effect of this one-week self-administered exercise was still strongly evident at follow-up assessments six months later. Extensive

research data comparing strengths across culture, gender, and age suggest few differences across categories. Of all the 24 strengths, the five most strongly correlated to happiness are gratitude, curiosity, vitality, hope, and the capacity to love and be loved. These last results suggest that strength-building exercises in these subcategories might be useful.

As a coach, the author has found the strengths survey to be quietly radical. Many clients have never had their strengths assessed and find that just reading the survey results helps them label or understand themselves in new ways. Our society has many words for nuances of pathology, but a much less developed language to depict subtle but profound differences in profiles of strength. In addition, my experience is that the survey offers information that is not readily apparent from simple observation and interaction, and it deepens our understanding and connection with clients.

### TRIAGE FOR HAPPINESS: THE AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS COACHING MODEL

I will now present one model of positive psychology coaching that has been developed from the outset with an empirically based orientation. The Authentic Happiness Coaching model evolved directly from the research described above; many studies are continually in progress (Seligman et al., 2005). The goal of Seligman and others in creating the AHC model is to provide a theoretically grounded and empirically supported set of techniques to foster happiness. While the interventions and exercises are useful to help people move from feeling unhappy or neutral to being happier, these psychologists were particularly interested in developing ways to help people move from a “+2” to a “+5” (Seligman, 2004; Seligman, Steen, et al., 2005).

The exercises described in the following paragraphs are for the CEOs, entrepreneurs, performers, and soccer moms and dads who are psychologically healthy but also want to lead more joyful, engaged, and meaningful lives. These are the individuals who can be well served by our being able to expand the repertoire of services available to include tested methods to achieve these ends, not just to reduce depression and anxiety. As we’ve seen, increasing happiness is not only an end unto itself; it also correlates with and may even help create greater competence, resilience, access to personal as well as social resources, improved physical health, and deeper connection to society and sense of personal mission.

I will describe a number of exercises and techniques from AHC in the hope that coaches will adapt them to fit into their own style of working.



One can pick and choose among exercises or use them as a whole, in a more stepwise, manual-like manner. Process-oriented coaches can incorporate the exercises as issues unfold in coaching. They can be offered to clients as between-session homework assignments or as in-session experiential exercises. The material can also be presented in a didactic-process format to individuals or groups. For the latter, sessions can begin with 15 minutes of personalized teaching, then segue into process discussion. The members can then pair up with one another during a group/workshop session or between sessions, to practice the exercise and debrief. Pairs (or triads) can then share what they learned when they return to the larger group with subsequent process discussion. While not describing specific session format at this time, my hope is coaches can integrate the material to their own training or coaching programs.

In order to coach to increase happiness, we must first arrive at a working definition. Seligman has identified three pathways to happiness: (1) through the emotions, (2) through connection with internal or external activity, and (3) through personal meaning. He calls these the Pleasant Life, the Engaged Life, and the Meaningful Life. Most often people think only of emotion and Hollywood impressions of life when they think of being happy. However, the second two pathways are equally, and probably more, compelling and lead to greater life satisfaction. The Engaged Life refers to being fully involved in life activity in work, relationships, and avocational pursuits. Coaching to increase engagement focuses on helping clients find what is intrinsically rewarding to them. Positive emotion and engagement together, however, don't automatically lead to deep satisfaction, as one can happily be engaged in "fidgeting one's life away." This leads us to develop access to the third pathway, finding meaning and purpose and connection to a greater cause. Together the three lives, Pleasant, Engaged, and Meaningful, help us to create the Full Life.

#### IDEALIZED SESSION PLANNING FOR AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS COACHING

The first step is to establish initial contact and then have clients take tests described in the appendix at the end of this chapter, which are all available at <http://authentic happiness.org>. I request that clients take baseline measures of depression and current happiness, as well as taking tests for approaches to happiness, life satisfaction, and strengths testing. Clients can retest themselves to assess their progress.

**POSITIVE INTRODUCTION EXERCISE** A good way to begin is to ask clients to describe themselves at their very best and to base this information on

concrete events from the previous week. This exercise builds rapport and begins training clients to identify and focus on their strengths. In further discussion we help them anchor their strengths, explore for details, and so on.

*Variations:* Ask some clients to write an introduction, as this draws on the natural strengths of those who are less verbally spontaneous. In workshops, having participants break into pairs for positive introductions is often very energizing. Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2005) use this when interviewing prospective graduate students and find it shifts the tone of the process substantially.

#### POSITIVE TRIAGE: PICKING A PATH TO HAPPINESS

The “approaches to happiness” questionnaire (Peterson, et al., 2005) assesses how high a person scores on three types of happiness: pleasure, engagement, and meaning. Clients can then pick what pathway to well-being they would like to work on first, either burnishing strongest areas or developing less-used pathways. Depending on their choice, the AHC coach picks from among numerous exercises available that have been developed to increase well-being in each of these three dimensions. Each exercise can be tweaked to fit with the client’s particular interest and style.

For simplicity’s sake the exercises are presented here in the following sequence: first the focus is on those that increase positive emotion; second, those aimed toward increasing engagement; and finally, those to increase one’s sense of purpose and meaning. In actual sessions there is great flexibility in what exercises a coach chooses and whether they are presented in a structured or process oriented way (see coaching scenarios below).

#### COACHING TO INCREASE POSITIVE EMOTION: THE PLEASANT LIFE

For those who work too hard or don’t open up to pleasurable emotions easily, these exercises help strengthen the capacity to enjoy life more fully. The exercises can help increase positive emotion about the present, the past, or the future.

##### *Exercises to Increase/Enhance Positive Emotion in the Present*

**SAVORING A BEAUTIFUL DAY** Ask the client to set aside a period of time—a half hour or even an entire day—and devote it to one’s favorite pleasurable activities. Savoring skill is increased by experimenting with such techniques as mindfully experiencing the moment, sensory memory building (taking mental pictures or finding physical souvenirs), focus-

ing on sharpening one's perceptions, attaining complete absorption in the activity, and later sharing the moment with others. The client notes any kind of "killjoy thinking" that arises and tries to find the best method for disarming it (Bryant & Veroff, in press).

*Purpose:* This exercise is a pleasure/mindfulness experience that can help clients who are on the hedonic treadmill. In other words, they have acclimated to success and good fortune and no longer feel as happy as their life circumstances would seem to merit. It is also a useful balance for the work-driven client who moves quickly from success to success without stopping to notice or absorb their lives. Over time clients learn to weave this skill into every day life.

**THREE BLESSINGS EXERCISE** Each night before going to bed, clients write down (or at least think about) three good things that happened that day. Then (this part is crucial) they ask themselves what they did to make each good thing happen. Often people are unaware of their own role in good fortune. For example, someone cannot make a beautiful sunset, but they can choose to take it in (or not).

This exercise is so simple it may feel simpleminded to many. However, it is receiving strong empirical support. Subjects participating in the three blessings (vs. placebo exercise of writing about childhood) were happier and less depressed six months after one week of three blessings homework.

*Variation 1:* In a work setting the coach can switch the question: What three things went right with the project today? What did the client do to make those good things happen?

*Variation 2:* When lying in bed at night and unfinished business pulls at the clients' thoughts, suggest they mull over: "When was I at my best today?" Often clients remember events that otherwise would have been overlooked.

### *Increasing/Enhancing Positive Emotion about the Past*

**GRATITUDE VISIT** The client identifies someone in his or her life who has been especially kind but whom the client has never properly thanked. The client writes a letter indicating specifically the reasons for his or her gratitude. The letter states concretely what that person had done and what results this has had in the client's life. Then the client calls the person and makes an appointment to meet, without indicating the reason for the meeting beyond that there is something important he or she would like to talk about. The client then meets the person and reads the letter aloud. People find this to be an enormously powerful experience. Early data suggest it has strong short-term (one-month) impact.

*Purpose:* Research suggests gratitude is one of the key strengths most associated with overall well-being. Beyond the specifics of the visit, learning the skill of having gratitude for people in your past has potential positive ramifications. Can the client transfer this to people in the present?

When clients would like to feel more positive about someone who has had a negative impact on them, another exercise might be useful.

**LETTING GO OF GRUDGES** The issue of forgiveness is complex and controversial, and may need to be balanced with issues of accountability and justice. However, when bitterness interferes with capacity to have more joy about one's life and the past, this exercise may help put things in a different perspective.

The client chooses a person he knows well who has done something hurtful. On a piece of paper he writes that person's name down in the middle of the paper, captures in a few words what he did (the grudge) and circles it. Then the client makes 15 circles on the page and fills each one in with a phrase describing what that same person did that was helpful and generous and for which the client is grateful. The client then holds the page at arm's length and tries to find the balance between how the person helped and hurt. Does the hurt get lost in what else this person did? Encourage the client to allow the situation to be complex and not black/white.

*Variation for a work setting:* If an executive is having a challenge with a boss/subordinate, have him write the problematic behavior/situation in the middle of the page and then balance it with 15 other things. This exercise can be used with both individuals as a precursor to conflict management sessions.

#### *Increasing/Enhancing Positive Emotion about the Future*

**ONE DOOR CLOSES, ONE DOOR OPENS** This is an optimism-building exercise. In this exercise, the client is instructed to think back over his or her life and make a list of times when he or she met with failure or loss or when plans were thwarted. Then the client searches for what good thing happened as a result of the first door closing.

*Variation:* The client practices this in a small way during a week as events unfold. For example, one event is canceled—what takes its place?

**OPTIMISM BUILDING** This exercise teaches clients the explanatory style of optimists, who tend to see what goes wrong as temporary and a result of circumstance or choices rather than seeing failure as related to one's

core. Then when things go right optimists tend to see this as more permanent and related to their core self, not simple luck. Clients are asked to go over a past failure and a past success. When something went wrong, they are to analyze it from the following perspective: to search for circumstances (not personal reasons) for the setback/failure, or to focus on specific actions (I'm a good planner, but didn't plan that day well). When they did something right they are to search for what character strengths accounted for the success.

**RAPID-FIRE DISPUTATION** When pessimistic thoughts interfere with a sense of hope, clients are taught the ABCDE method of disputing the pessimistic assessment. A = adversity (the problem/pessimistic thought); B = your automatic beliefs about it; C = the usual consequences; D = your disputing your routine belief; and E = the energizing you can get when you dispute effectively. To help clients dispute negative beliefs, urge them to get outside the box of their thinking and search for evidence that concretely challenges the thought; have them find just one thing that disputes their conclusion (e.g., I'm a bad boss or bad parent). Then search for alternate explanations for challenges and look for aspects the client can control (see Seligman, 2002).

*Variation:* Clients can do this as homework, or they can pick someone to help them "argue" with the pessimistic thought. The partner may also play devil's advocate to help the client increase the capacity to dispute it.

#### COACHING TO INCREASE FLOW AND INVOLVEMENT: THE ENGAGED LIFE

The Engaged Life is the pathway that involves the identification of one's strengths and learning how to use them at work, in relationships, and in leisure. As a result one can be more vitally involved with what one is doing, and therefore with one's own life (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). By pulling more strongly on natural strengths, the client can find that certain tasks become more intrinsically rewarding and motivating. For example, if love of learning is a top strength, one can learn to harness it to make activities more enjoyable (see below).

#### *Engagement with Activity*

**USING STRENGTH IN A NEW WAY** Clients choose one of their top strengths and during the week find a designated time to exercise the strength in a new way at work, home, or leisure. The exercise is to first go through a day (in real time or through recall) to identify situations where one's

signature strengths are already in action. Then the clients brainstorm new ways to use the strength (see case example of Bonita, described later).

*Variation 1:* Finding ways clients can use their strengths under adversity. When a situation is challenging coach and client brainstorm and practice how the client's signature strength can be applied to improve or make the most of the situation. For example: For public speaking anxiety, how might clients pull on gratitude, love of learning, or capacity to love in order to center themselves in their core strength/value and find the energy or resolve to continue?

*Variation 2:* When engaged in an action that increases anxiety, read over the conditions of flow and slightly alter the parameters of the task to be in line with natural strengths.

### *Increasing Engagement with Others*

**STRENGTHS DATE** A client chooses someone with whom to share some time. Both participants identify their signature strengths through the VIA Signature Strengths Survey. Then they plan an activity that puts into play one or more of the signature strengths of each. For example, if one client has appreciation of beauty and excellence as a signature strength, and the other has love of learning, then they might plan a trip to the local art museum so that they can learn about beautiful art objects together.

*Variations:* In a work or team setting, take members' natural skills into account when delegating (or volunteering) for particular tasks. Have work teams all take the VIA if they are interested. If a colleague or friend is unable or uninterested in taking the VIA, have the client guess what the other's signature strengths might be and use that when planning an activity or choosing a gift for the friend.

**RELATIONAL ENGAGEMENT** Practice active, constructive responding based on findings that being active and constructive in responding to another fosters interpersonal flow. Being passive and constructive or active/passive and destructive does not predict interpersonal engagement (Gable, Ries, Impett, & Asher, 2004).

*Variations:* Practice active/constructive responding in the work setting, saving criticisms until afterward. Notice whether conflicts are reduced and if behavioral repertoire of the team shifts.

### COACHING TO INCREASE SENSE OF PURPOSE: THE MEANINGFUL LIFE

The third pathway involves the use of one's strengths in the service of something larger than oneself. The focus shifts to the positive effects one can have on one's family, on one's community, and even on the

world at large. Pilot research shows that tapping strengths in the service of others or a larger cause increases life satisfaction and experience of feeling fulfilled.

**FUN VERSUS PHILANTHROPY** Clients are asked to plan one act for personal enjoyment and then follow through. On another day they plan one altruistic act to bring joy to another. Each of these days they fill out the happiness rating scale (see Appendix on page 249) to see what actually makes them feel better at the end of the day.

**STRENGTHS FAMILY TREE** A client asks members of his family to take the VIA Signature Strengths Survey and report the results. The client creates a family tree, and notes each person's strengths on the tree. For grandparents, great-grandparents, or others who are no longer alive, family members can discuss together what they think those persons' strengths might have been. Once the strengths have been listed on the tree, family members can take turns telling anecdotes that illustrate the various strengths of the other family members and then note and discuss any insights that arise as a result of knowing each other's signature strengths.

*Variation:* In the Work Strengths Tree exercise, clients repeat the Strengths Family Tree exercise with people they work with on a daily basis. They think through the key strengths of colleagues, bosses, or subordinates and plan to relate to them differently in light of this information.

**GIFT OF TIME, OR POSITIVE SERVICE** Interventions for cultivating the Meaningful Life are intended to help clients put their signature strengths to work in the service of something larger than themselves. Here a client is asked to think about the various domains of life beyond herself that would benefit from the gift of her time and the application of her signature strengths. These domains could be institutions the client cares about, groups of underprivileged people, or ideals the client believes are worth fighting for. The client is then asked to develop a plan for intentionally using one or more of her signature strengths in the service of this institution, population, or idea. While it might be powerful for a client to analyze service she is already engaged in to see which of her strengths it makes use of, the point of this exercise is to go beyond that to the intentional creation and execution of a new plan of strengths-based service.

**THE LIFE SUMMARY** This is an exercise where a client writes out an account of his life as he might want a great-grandchild to perceive it. What are the things that the client finds most meaningful in life and for

which he would most want to be remembered? Some of these things may already be present in a client's life, and some may be things he will want to move toward. The Life Summary exercise is intended to help a client focus both on maintaining important things that are already present in his life and on cultivating those new things he wants to include in his life. By writing out the Life Summary and then reading it periodically, a client can help maintain a meaningful perspective on his life. Meaningful Life is intended to help clients gain perspective on what is most important in their lives.

#### EXERCISES FOR ALL THREE PATHWAYS TO HAPPINESS: FINDING THE FULL LIFE

This exercise can help your clients develop the capacity to observe their own levels of happiness.

**DIARY EXERCISE** The client is instructed to go through a regular day and answer the following questions on an hourly basis. What did I do? To what extent was it enjoyable? To what extent was I in flow? To what extent did the activity have meaning? Review the day. Develop hypotheses about what fosters happiness in the way that feels most satisfying and/or important.

**PLAN FOR HAPPINESS** Apply the information learned in the Diary Exercise. Then take a day, even if it's busy, and think through how the client can plan three activities: one that is pleasurable, one that is engaging, and one that is meaningful. Notice which ones come easily and which ones do not. Make sure to do all three! At times this can mean just stopping to notice what one is already doing that's been pleasurable, engaging or meaningful, but could enjoy more if one was mindful of the experience. Anecdotal evidence suggests that engaging in small positive behaviors can shift the balance of how one experiences the day and overcome the hedonic treadmill.

The preceding exercises are currently being tested for effectiveness for increasing happiness, reducing depression, and increasing engagement and meaning. While on the surface these interventions are most obviously related to individual and personal coaching, it is fairly clear how one might apply these in work settings. The Gallup Organization, for example, first assesses signature strengths of all the primary leaders of an organization, then continues down through the organizational hierarchy until every person in the entire institution has been tested on Gallup's Strength Survey (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Stone, 2004). Then, once everyone is familiar with the language and comfortable with



the philosophy, programs to make companywide shifts in optimal task assignment and management communication are implemented. In this way the strengths culture can permeate the system prior to explicit changes in management.

## **USING AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS COACHING IN A SESSION**

Given how clear it is to see how you could use these exercises in a structured manner, the case examples here illustrate how a coach might use positive psychology and authentic happiness coaching in process oriented coaching. These vignettes are not intended to give an overarching sense of coaching sessions, but are glimpses into the process. In both cases we'll hone in on just one area: how to help clients orient to their challenge in a way that pulls on their strengths. For Bonita, the experience is supportive in nature; for Bob, it requires positive confrontation.

### **Case Example of Bonita**

Bonita was recently promoted to vice-president of HR at her firm. Her goals are to improve her conflict management and leadership and work toward better work-life balance. We focus on her strengths and conflict management in the following snippet.

After making contact I'd ask Bonita for a positive introduction. As Bonita tells her story I'd listen for her natural strengths and notice her preferred relational style. Afterward I'd ask questions about her introduction in order to augment her appreciation of her strengths and help anchor this information more firmly into her consciousness and self-image. If she slips into describing weaknesses, first listen, provide support, but also redirect attention back to her best self.

The next few sessions would explore Bonita's signature strengths. I'd expect her VIA top strength profile to be:

- Bonita has a strong capacity to love and be loved; she cares deeply about others and often puts their needs first.
- She also has a very strong love of learning and building her knowledge. (This strength exists in tandem with the love of teaching, which surfaces in her ways of interacting with colleagues.)
- Similar to many who have survived hardship and thrived, she would also be very high in gratitude. We see this surface in her relationship to her father.
- Persistence is also a top strength. She works hard and follows through on her promises.
- In the domain of civic strengths she'd show a very high strength in citizenship, as the needs of many are of key importance, as is fairness to others.

The positive psychology orientation suggests that teaching Bonita to harness her natural strengths would be an optimal pathway to increase effectiveness in both these areas. Bonita has many avenues to increase her ability to engage in con-

structive conflict. The first work I'd do with signature strengths includes the assignment to identify top strengths and find new ways to use them in the current week. Then I would focus in on her goals regarding conflict and leadership.

Our work might evolve as follows:

*Coach:* So you feel your leadership skills would be more complete if you were less afraid of conflict?

*Bonita:* Yes, it's the one area where I feel over my head, especially with Rick.

*Coach:* What's the challenge?

*Bonita:* Every time he makes a criticism or remark I just try harder to appease him.

*Coach:* Does that work?

*Bonita:* Not really. Last time my team, instead of me, wound up confronting him. I need to be more in the lead now.

*Coach:* What would that look like?

*Bonita:* I'd have to confront him myself. I don't know, maybe get a little angry? *(With the last phrase Bonita's voice tone suddenly rises, becoming high-pitched and questioning, like a little girl.)*

*Coach:* I hear your voice getting littler as you speak. What's that about?

*Bonita:* I'm not good with getting angry. I don't think well on my feet.

*Coach:* You know, there are many pathways to engaging in conflict. It sounds like getting angry doesn't play to your strengths.

*Bonita:* That's for sure! *(She laughs, suddenly sounding more energetic and grown-up again.)*

*Coach:* Well, let's play to your strengths. How would the perfect you, functioning at your very best, manage a conflict with Rick? *(Coach is pulling for images of agency from the client.)*

*Bonita:* I'd head it off at the pass by connecting with him early on and engaging in a dialogue. *(Client is smiling but lowers her eyes; coach senses shame.)*

*Coach:* That makes sense. It pulls on your primary strength of the capacity to love and be loved. I bet you already do that very well. *(Coach works to reframe the self-deprecating subtext.)*

*Bonita:* Yes, that's true, but sometimes it isn't enough.

*Coach:* That's why we have other strengths. How might you pull on your second strength to help you manage conflict? *(Coach is helping client deepen awareness of strengths and begin to consider using them in a new way.)*

*Bonita:* Love of learning? I've read quite a lot about conflict management.

*Coach:* Love of learning also surfaces as a love of teaching. *(Coach is not interested in asking about her intellectual understanding, but flies another aspect of this strength past to see if it catches her attention.)*

*Bonita:* Oh, teaching . . . *(Looking out the window, thinking.)* I could teach him to share his ideas in a less disruptive way? *(Voice tone rises in pitch—she sounds tentative, not as much as before.)*

*Coach:* How could you do that?

*Bonita:* Well, I could talk to him when he isn't being disruptive—I know, I could set up a conflict management seminar for the entire team, and have us all learn more about it together.

*Coach:* That might be useful. *(This is a noncommittal response; coach senses client is sidling up to more core material and is quiet to help create more space for self-inquiry.)*

*Bonita:* Yes, but you know if I'm honest, that avoids the real issue.

*Coach:* Which is?

*Bonita:* Confronting Rick and being comfortable with being angry with him directly.

*Coach:* Can I put on my consultant hat for a minute? *(Coach points out role shift by asking permission. Client is clearly stuck in an aggression model of conflict that makes her feel badly and is therefore not able to think flexibly. Goal here is to provide alternative and help her access positive sense of self and expand behavioral repertoire.)*

*Bonita:* Please do!

*Coach:* When there's conflict and you have to decide whether to address it, most of us think along the lines of: Is this so bad I simply must say something or I'll burst? That particular decision tree does not pull on your strengths. You're not a natural fighter. I wonder if you're putting yourself in a too small a box by thinking you have to be angry to engage in conflict. What would it be like if you thought more along the lines of: What could I say to Rick that would teach him how to work with me and the team more effectively?

*Bonita:* You mean I could put on my teacher hat? *(Client is sounding intrigued and energetic again.)*

*Coach:* Exactly. Now, if we go back to my question—how might the perfect you, you at your best, manage conflict with Rick?

*Bonita:* That's easy—the perfect me would say, "Rick, I appreciate your suggestions. For me, it would work best if you shared them before the main meeting so we could use your input more effectively." It would help him, you know. He winds up alienating people when he shoots me down, and he does it to co-workers as well.

*Coach:* Have you noticed your voice tone?

*Bonita:* What about it?

*Coach:* You don't sound little anymore.

By helping Bonita back to her central strengths, the coach empowers her to more easily access her already well-formed teaching and communication skills and use them in the service of conflict management. If her signature strengths were in the area of justice, the coach could tailor the conversation quite differently. In that situation, the coach might harness the client's core values of fairness and justice. For each person, whatever the nature of the challenge, the coach tries to find the bridge connecting that challenge to the client's primary strengths.

### **Case Example of Bob**

Bob is a CEO having difficulty managing a major upward transition. As occasionally happens, his board has gathered to "fix" him. We'll imagine that coaching was initiated after a previous consultant did a traditional 360-degree feedback

session. This consists of lengthy interviews from all the people surrounding Bob and reflecting back what they think of him as a CEO and leader as well as a person. The information from board members, top management, middle management, and a few employees is a combination of superlative performance ratings and strong criticisms. After the previous executive coach tried to get Bob to become a kinder and gentler corporate magnate, Bob initiated a series of moves that resulted in the coach being placed elsewhere. The data from the 360-degree feedback session has been forwarded to a positive psychologist who is implicitly requested to “fix” Bob so things will go well.

The primary challenge Bob is facing is that his multinational company is merging with its main competitor, a South Korea–based company, and his board worries that his high-powered American cowboy style will not be nuanced enough to allow the merger to go through. Bob’s goals are for the merger to go well and to leave his company in “perfect order” when he retires a few years down the road. He has been clear that he is not interested in the “soft side” of coaching.

As a positive psychology coach I would begin the first session in the usual manner by asking Bob to tell a story about himself at his best during a specific experience the previous week. As he gives the introduction, I’d build rapport, assess his strengths and values, and afterward explore these more fully.

Bob would also take the Values in Action questionnaire to assess his signature strengths. The second session would engage him in dialogue about these strengths and how he uses them in everyday life. People often have the invigorating “aha” experience of finding words for experiences they could never name until learning their strengths. Those not initially interested in psychological interventions often find it energizing to develop self-reflection skills in the context of exploring a new language for real and specific strengths (vs. flattery) and by focusing on health rather than pathology.

Bob’s top signature strengths would probably include:

- Persistence—industriousness and overcoming obstacles.
- Bravery—not shrinking from threat or difficulty.
- Vitality—zest, enthusiasm.
- Leadership—encouraging a group to get things done.
- Humor/hope (these might be tied for fifth place).

I’d discuss and explore with Bob how these strengths have formed the powerful building blocks for his success. In Bob’s case he shows extraordinary strengths in two areas, courage and transcendence. In major leadership positions one hopes for a greater breadth of strengths, ideally one highly developed strength for at least four areas.

For Bob, it might be best to tailor a different signature strength exercise, for example, ask him to pick five people of importance to the merger and have them take the VIA. I’d then ask Bob to guess their strengths and assess his accuracy. The purpose here would be to make it interesting for him to begin thinking in a strengths language about others, and have the implicit support or confrontation of his social intelligence by how well he did.

Bob is a CEO with major strengths; to reach his goals, however, he is going to need to acknowledge the importance of areas in which he is not as strong. At home, he has his wife to cover him in these areas of weakness. At work, he apparently doesn't have people he respects to fill this role. There is no way around this issue, and like the previous coach, we need to address his liabilities. As good coaches, we remain as unattached as possible to whether our interventions will get us fired. Circling the truth is a good way to lose a consultation job.

*Coach:* So, Bob, what was it like to see all that feedback? *(I don't shrink from bringing up touchy topics just because I'm "positive.")*

*Bob:* Most of it was great, but of course there were the requisite amount of kicks in the head.

*Coach:* Like what?

*Bob:* That I'm seen as a superficial glad-hander who doesn't listen or follow through with being nice to people. That's true enough—I just move forward when things get tough.

*Coach:* What do you make of that?

*Bob:* You have to break eggs to make an omelet.

*Coach:* That's true, but what else might be going on?

*Bob:* People like to take potshots at the leader. What else is new?

*Coach:* Leaders are targets; that's the truth. But they're also the ones who inspire their communities to greatness. If you kick that part of yourself in gear, what would you like to do with the negative feedback? *(Notice the coach refocusing Bob's attention to himself at his best and using what he shared in his positive introduction to do that. The coach also is using Bob's "kick" image, which reflects strong affect, and channeling it in a growth-promoting direction.)*

*Bob:* Learn from it—or get them to change their minds about me. What did you learn from it? You're the expert.

*Coach:* I imagine I learned what's probably obvious—you are incredibly successful, you're courageous, and you get things done that other people find utterly overwhelming.

*Bob: (Interrupting)* That's for damn sure, but what about the bad stuff?

*Coach:* You know, Bob, spectacular people have spectacular flaws. It goes with the territory. What makes leaders great is how they manage those flaws. Your challenge, if you choose to accept it, is to look this problem in the eye and figure out how to fix it. *(Notice the implicit use of the 3:1 ratio, being clear about the positive and the negative, then calling on Bob's strengths of bravery and persistence to galvanize his effort.)*

*Bob:* I never run from a fight.

*Coach:* Where do you want to start?

*Bob:* I'm not sure. That touchy-feely stuff isn't my cup of tea.

*Coach:* That's true. According to the VIA your top three strengths are all in the category of courage: persistence, bravery, and zest. And these contribute to your other top strength of leadership. This is an incredible combination, but the humanity strengths lag pretty far behind—and I wonder if that gets in your way at times.

*Bob:* I'm a big picture guy. Relationships aren't high on my radar.

*Coach:* Is that true in all aspects of your life?

*Bob:* Personally, no—things at home work perfectly. Professionally, my priority is making sure all systems interface optimally. People aren't my focus.

*Coach:* They don't have to be. But from your big picture perspective, what costs might you pay if you don't bump up your awareness of human interfaces? *(Coach is pulling on Bob's strengths to help create a context where he can think more flexibly.)*

*Bob:* *(Pauses, looks combative for a second, then sighs.)* Damn, I don't want to think about this. . . . *(Another long pause; coach nods, smiles slightly, but remains silent.)* Okay, it's obvious, isn't it? The cost could just be my legacy. If people resent me, all hell could break loose when I leave.

*Coach:* Empires don't always outlast their founders. *(Coach resists reassurances, but also doesn't leap in to blare out the obvious problem.)* Any thoughts on what could lessen the chance of that happening?

*Bob:* Most of what I do works, but you know, I'm in up the stratosphere now, with the highest fliers. Things can get tricky and smaller problems can surface in big ways.

*Coach:* Like not being interested in people?

*Bob:* Right. But I am who I am; that isn't going to change.

*Coach:* Most people can't change their core selves very much. But if people skills aren't your natural strength, what do you think makes sense?

*Bob:* Having someone around who does this stuff more naturally than I do. That would leave me free to do the strategic work.

*Coach:* You know, Bob, didn't you say your personal life works perfectly? From what I've heard others think you've done this balancing act brilliantly in your personal life. *(Coach is trying to help Bob generalize from one domain to another, something he tends not to do as he's very compartmentalized.)*

*Bob:* You mean—with my wife? *(Bob hesitates, making the connection.)*

*Coach:* Exactly. Didn't you say that you do what you do best, she does what she does and you're great complements to each other?

*Bob:* Right, but lightning doesn't strike twice. I don't think I could find such a great match at work.

*Coach:* Bob, is there anything in this life that you've ever really wanted that you haven't gotten? *(Coach throws down the gauntlet safely in Bob's greatest strength—persistence. If Bob values solving this problem, he clearly will.)*

*Bob:* No, and I see where you're heading. I could get it if I really wanted to *(he grins)*—I could sink my teeth into that.

Bob now feels ready to connect to the challenge. If Bob's primary strengths were in a different area, the coach would shift, framing the core issue in a way that would pull on what is intrinsically rewarding to the client, for instance, curiosity, justice, and so on. It is very important for the coach to set up assignments, inquiries, or confrontations based on the client's signature strengths, not the coach's strengths or agenda.

## CONCLUSION

Positive psychology has the potential to provide a theoretical and empirical underpinning, an internal scaffolding if you will, to the emerging profession of coaching. There is evidence-based support for the utility of attending to a client's wholeness, fostering hope and helping that client hone his vision of the future. There is a firm base of data that the increases in joy and positive emotion that we often see in coaching are not a woo-woo phenomenon. It can be reliably and validly measured, and its positive impact on fostering cognitive and social skills is very amenable to the light of scientific scrutiny.

Advances in the field also explicitly and implicitly offer a wide range of possible applications. There are psychometrically robust measures to assess strengths, and empirically testable positive interventions that have been found to increase happiness, productivity, and life satisfaction. For those who have seen the power of coaching on a personal level, it behooves you to be aware of the larger science base that can support this perspective. Obviously all coaching doesn't work; we are a new field and must make mistakes to move the process of discovery forward. While coaching is an art, it is one that can be built on science. At each phase of growth as individuals and as a profession, there is an optimal dialectical tension of art and science as the art informs the science which in turn can inform the art. It is time to transcend the notion that it is one or the other, and for coach-practitioners to become adept at both.

## APPENDIX: TESTS USED IN AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS COACHING

### POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE AFFECT SCHEDULE (PANAS)

This scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) provides a snapshot of the clients' current, momentary affective state. Interestingly, positive affect and negative affect are almost independent of each other. So it is possible, for example, for a client to feel both high positive affect and high negative affect at the same time.

### FORDYCE EMOTIONS QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire (Fordyce, 1988) is a very quick, one-item assessment used to measure clients' typical level of happiness. This measure is not domain specific.

### SATISFACTION WITH LIFE SCALE

This scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffen, 1985) measures clients' general satisfaction with life as a whole. This measure is not domain specific.

### APPROACHES TO HAPPINESS QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005) is designed to measure the extent to which clients are using each of the three pathways to happiness. This questionnaire measures the use of each of the three pathways and gives a score for each.

### AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS INVENTORY QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire (Peterson, 2005) is intended to measure changes in overall happiness levels across time.

### CENTER FOR EPIDEMIOLOGICAL STUDIES DEPRESSION SCALE (CES-D)

This Scale (Radloff, 1977) measures changes in overall depressive symptoms across time. Using this scale in tandem with the others can help to indicate whether clients are becoming less depressed as well as more happy.

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Positive Psychology Coaching lays-down a good, fundamental blueprint for understanding the mindset required for moving towards coaching from a positive psychology methodology, and provides a wealth of research on the subject within the notes. In my opinion it is an excellent introduction into the heart of Positive Psychology. It's a fascinating topic and this book presents the importance of this branch of psychology very well. Read more. Positive Psychology Introduction Positive psychology is the study of what is right with people and what makes life worth living. For many years psychology has focused on pathology and pain with a goal of curing illnesses. It overlooked developing an equally robust exploration of what is "positive." In many ways positive psychology provides the scientific legs upon which the field of coaching can stand. Positive psychology as a full movement is just over a decade old. However, much of what it studies is not new, but is rooted in the tenets of ancient philosophy and the modern humanistic movement. Positive Psychology Coaching (PPC) is a scientifically-rooted approach to helping clients increase well-being, enhance and apply strengths, improve performance, and achieve valued goals. At the core of PPC is a belief in the power of science to elucidate the best [methods for development]. Kauffman, Boniwell, and Silberman (2010). Within Positive Psychology, there is a multitude of assessments, resources, tools, and feedback models that can help a coach to build a highly tailored, structured coaching journey that is ultimately backed up with measurable evidence. As mentioned, exploring negative Positive Psychology Coaching (PPC) is a scientifically-rooted approach to helping clients increase wellbeing, enhance and apply strengths, improve performance, and achieve valued goals. At the core of PPC is a belief in the power of science to elucidate the best [methods for development]. Kauffman, Boniwell, and Silberman (2010). Positive psychology is backed by a vast body of professional research, meaning that a coaching model based on positive psychology concepts can offer a more structured and reliable approach to supporting individuals to achieve their goals.