

WHAT IS COACHING PSYCHOLOGY? (Updated March 2026)

Coaching psychology is a distinct branch of academic and applied psychology that focuses on the enhancement of performance, development, and wellbeing in both work and personal domains through the application of coaching models that are grounded in psychological theories, methods and approaches (Grant, 2006; Grant & Cavanagh, 2007a; Palmer & Whybrow, 2007). Coaching psychology formally emerged as a discipline at the turn of the twenty-first century. It has its roots in Australia and the United Kingdom, with leading originators being Dr. Anthony Grant of the University of Sydney and, in the UK, Professor Stephen Palmer (see, for example, Grant, 2007; Grant & Cavanagh, 2007b; Palmer & Whybrow, 2005).

What is coaching?

The Association for Coaching defines coaching as:

“...a collaborative, solution-focused, results-orientated and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of work performance, life experience, self-directed learning and personal growth of the coachee” (AC, 2015).

Similarly, Downey (2003) offers the following concise definition:

“Coaching is the art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another” (p. 21).

It is notable that neither of these definitions refers to the enhancement of *wellbeing*, which emerges as a potential benefit of coaching in the existing evidence base (see below).

What is a Coaching Psychologist?

A Coaching Psychologist is essentially a psychologist who works with others to support the enhancement of performance, development, and well-being using psychology-informed coaching approaches (ISCP, 2015). Coaching Psychologists come from a broad range of backgrounds, often having previously qualified and worked as either e.g. Clinical, Occupational or Educational Psychologists, and most frequently report that they spend up to 50% of their time working as a Coaching Psychologist (Whybrow & Palmer, 2006). However, the title is not legally protected, and so effectively *anyone* can call themselves a Coaching Psychologist if they choose – a danger that leaves the title open to abuse. Nonetheless, to obtain accredited membership of a professional body like the International Society for Coaching Psychology (www.isfcp.net), for example, requires the psychologist to have “...a graduate degree in psychology, relevant post-graduate qualifications, and [to] have undertaken suitable continuing professional development and supervised practice” (ISCP, *ibid*). Similarly, obtaining Chartered Status with the British Psychological Society (BPS)’s Division of Coaching Psychology requires the practitioner to demonstrate that they meet eight core standards of practice. The BPS also maintains a [Register of Coaching Psychologists](#) “...to provide recognition for Chartered Coaching Psychologists and the profession of coaching psychology.” (BPS, 2026). Whether or not a psychologist elects to pursue either of these routes in order to demonstrate their credentials to practice coaching, there is a general duty on any psychologist to “practice within the boundaries of their competence” and to

“engage in additional areas of professional activity only after obtaining the knowledge, skill, training, education, and experience necessary for competent functioning” (BPS, 2009).

What psychological approaches are relevant to coaching?

The psychological approaches drawn upon will depend on the orientation of the specific practitioner. The *Handbook of Coaching Psychology* (Palmer & Whybrow, 2007, 2018) provides a broad overview of a number of approaches that can inform coaching practice, and reflects the need for coaching psychologists to be able to draw upon a diverse range of methods to meet the needs of their clients. The following is a non-exhaustive list of examples:

Person-Centred Approaches

(Carl Rogers, 1951, 1961). Rogers maintained that people have an inherent tendency to grow and develop, and that this potential is released in a social environment where the person feels understood, valued and accepted. Rogers postulated the three ‘core conditions’ a therapist (or other ‘helper’) needs to provide for change to occur – *unconditional positive regard*, *genuineness*, and *empathic understanding*.

Cognitive-Behavioural Approaches

From the cognitive-behavioural perspective, a person’s feelings about a situation are not caused by the event itself, but rather their thoughts and interpretations about the event (Beck, 1967, 1976; Ellis, 1962). Individuals can experience ‘thinking errors’ that can distort their interpretation of reality and impact negatively on both feelings and behaviour. Thinking errors can be transformed into more adaptive thoughts through the process of *disputation* and the application of *thinking skills* (see e.g. Greenberger & Padesky, 1995; Ellis, 1988; Beck, 2011). Cognitive-behavioural approaches also place an emphasis on supporting the coachee with systematic problem-solving (e.g. Palmer 2007, 2008).

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

The solution-focused approach is underpinned by the principle that an understanding of the origin or cause of a problem is not necessary to start building a solution. Clients bring with them valuable resources that can be harnessed as they

move towards their preferred future (De Shazer, 1985, 1988; Berg & De Jong, 2000).

Motivational Interviewing

Motivational Interviewing is a way of being with and communicating with people that elicits their own intrinsic motivation to change, underpinned by principles of collaboration, evocation, and autonomy (Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

Non-violent communication (NVC)

NVC provides a language of emotions and core universal needs within a framework for communication that can be applied to: developing greater self-awareness; expressing one’s own needs without violating the needs of others; and receiving others empathically (Rosenberg, 2003).

Self-Determination Theory

According to SDT, social environments can either facilitate or forestall human potential according to the extent they satisfy the core needs of *autonomy*, *relatedness*, and *competence* (Ryan & Deci, 2000). From an SDT perspective, individuals who experience their behaviour as self-determined in contexts where these needs are satisfied will demonstrate enhanced intrinsic motivation, performance, and wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Positive Psychology

Rather than exploring the psychology of dysfunction or how to ameliorate distress, positive psychology focuses on the conditions in which people perform optimally and experience greater wellbeing. Areas of exploration include the value of positive emotion, interventions for improving happiness and wellbeing, identifying and utilizing strengths, building resilience, and developing positive interpersonal relationships (see e.g. Seligman, 2003).

Research into the impact of coaching

A growing number of studies have demonstrated the benefits of coaching interventions in a variety of domains. The following are some examples:

- Recent research in the UK public sector has indicated that resilience coaching can impact positively on confidence in dealing with

organisational change (Sherlock-Storey et al, 2013)

- In Australia, a randomized controlled study on the impact of coaching on high school teachers found that coaching was associated with increased goal-attainment, reduced stress, and enhanced workplace wellbeing and resilience (Grant, Green & Rynsaardt, 2010).
- Coaching has also been shown to have a positive impact on implementation rates following professional development experiences in comparison to 'workshop only' controls (Cornett & Knight, 2008; Knight & van Nieuwerburgh, 2012).

The journal *International Coaching Psychology Review* regularly publishes research regarding applications of coaching, and can be obtained by joining the British Psychological Society's Division of Coaching Psychology (see below).

Next steps

If you are interested in developing coaching psychology as a strand of your professional practice, or moving towards either Accredited or Chartered Coaching Psychologist status, then the following websites, journals and books may be of interest to you:

LINKS AND FURTHER READING

Websites

British Psychological Society Division of Coaching Psychology (DoCP)

In its previous life a cross-divisional Special Interest Group in Coaching Psychology (SGCP, 2004-2021), the now formally-established *Division of Coaching Psychology* provides a home within the BPS for those interested in coaching psychology, and provides a pathways for members to obtain Chartered Coaching Psychologist status. The DoCP also publishes the peer-reviewed journals *The Coaching Psychologist* and *International Coaching Psychology Review*.

<https://www.bps.org.uk/member-networks/division-coaching-psychology>

International Society for Coaching Psychology

An international society that provides an accreditation route for Coaching Psychologists and produces the journal *Coaching Psychology International*.

www.isfcp.net

Centre for Coaching

London-based training centre providing courses in coaching, coaching psychology, and its applications.

www.centreforcoaching.com

Books and journals

Adams, M. (2015). *Coaching Psychology in Schools: Enhancing Performance, Development & Wellbeing*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Palmer, S. & Whybrow, A. (Eds.) (2007, 2018), *Handbook of Coaching Psychology: A Guide for Practitioners*. Hove: Routledge.

Law, H. (2013). *Coaching Psychology: A Practitioner's Guide*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

The Coaching Psychologist was first published in hardcopy by the BPS SGCP in July 2005, while the Australian IGCP and the SGCP have collaborated to publish *International Coaching Psychology Review* since April 2006. Both journals continue to be published bi-annually, supporting evidence-based practice in the field of coaching and coaching psychology and providing a forum for Coaching Psychologists to share their learning and findings through peer-reviewed publications. They can be obtained from the [BPS Shop](#) (downloadable for free if you are a member of the DoCP).

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