

Academic Paper

Empowering female pre-retirees with a goal focused coaching relationship and a direct focus on well-being: A mixed method multiple case study

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Abstract

This multiple case study of life coaching uses an embedded mixed method design to examine the question: How does an evidence based coaching approach, including the use of the PERMA Profiler, assist the selection of personally meaningful goals and enhance well-being for women at the preretirement phase of life? Thematic analysis of the data from three cases, including the coach and the client's perspective, highlights a focus on specific goals, exploration and self-reflection that is anchored by higher order goals aligned to participants' well-being values. Participants reported feeling more positive, in control and aware of the impacts on their well-being.

Keywords

life coaching, pre-retirees, well-being, goal hierarchy, applied positive psychology,

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Introduction

As a goal directed process, coaching focuses on clients' attainments of their valued personal or professional outcomes (Grant, 2003). This goal focused relationship has been shown to be a strong predictor of coaching outcomes (Grant, 2014). There has been a call for coaches to develop a greater understanding of the role of goals, their context dependency, benefits, drawbacks, and various dimensions, as well as goal setting theory and associated theories (e.g., David, Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2014; Grant, 2012; Jinx & Dexter, 2012; Ordonez, Schweitzer, Galinsky, & Bazerman, 2009).

The use of psychological theories and evidence-based research has helped bring the coaching industry and coaching psychology together, distinguishing it from the pseudo-science personal development industry (Grant & Cavanagh, 2014). Evidence based coaching refers to "the intelligent

and conscientious use of relevant and best current knowledge integrated with professional practitioner expertise in making decisions about how to deliver coaching to clients and in designing and delivering coach training programs” (Grant, 2012, p64). Along with technical skills and knowledge, coaches need to be able to source such information, understand it, decide if it is appropriate, apply it in line with their client’s specific needs and evaluate its effectiveness (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004). Such a pragmatic approach through action research and case studies can inform future understanding about the coaching process both individually and more widely (Cox, 2011).

Life coaching, with its focus on personal goals, aspirations, and the enhancement of personal functioning across various life domains (Spence & Grant 2007), lacks the guidance of a solid body of empirical data. However, life coaching and positive psychology seem to be well aligned (Spence & Grant, 2007), with both focused on facilitating the fulfillment of potential and enhancing well-being, and performance. More broadly, coaching psychology and applied positive psychology are seen as mutually beneficial partners (positive psychology coaching; e.g., Oades & Passmore, 2014; Biswas Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2007). The explicit focus on well-being is seen as a defining feature of positive psychology coaching, which draws from the relevant theory and evidence base from positive psychology and the science of well-being (Oades & Passmore, 2014), as well as the relevant psychology literature, such as goal setting, self regulation and change dynamics (Spence & Grant 2007). Therefore, a goal focused relationship and a direct focus on well-being would be central to life coaching as an applied positive psychology intervention.

Well-being theory and coaching

In Seligman’s well-being theory (2011) the construct of well-being consists of the development of one or more of the five measurable elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment (PERMA). The model suggests these elements are the building blocks of well-being and are pursued by people because they are intrinsically motivating (Seligman, 2011). To date there are no coaching studies using this multidimensional model of well-being or the validated PERMA Profiler questionnaire (Butler & Kern, 2016; see Appendix). Life coaching, as an applied positive psychology intervention, can help individuals to reflect on the components of well-being, understand themselves more, identify what matters and set personally meaningful goals. Individuals who are contemplating retirement are well situated for such reflection, prioritising, goal setting and pursuit, particularly as goal directed behavior has been identified as a consistent predictor of well-being for retirees (Kubicek, Korunka, Raymo & Hoonakker, 2011).

Goal setting theory and coaching

The literature on goal setting that improves client well-being and effectiveness is complex. Practicing coaches can be confused about knowing when they should encourage the setting of goals and how specific the goals should be, especially if they are following a goal based process coaching model (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2016; Grant, 2012). A more nuanced understanding of goal setting can enable a more client centred, less simplistic approach towards goal setting that is likely to enhance client’s well-being and promote the positive, purposeful change they desire (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2016; Grant, 2012).

Goals that a person is committed to, provide direction and purpose, boosting effort and persistence, as well as prompting the use of strategies to pursue and achieve them (Locke & Latham, 1990). Hence, people monitor, evaluate and adjust their thoughts, feelings and actions in support of attaining their goals (Locke, 1996). Coaching conversations help clients to achieve their goals or aspirations essentially by boosting their self-regulation skills (Grant & Spence, 2014; see Ives & Cox, 2012 for a practical and theoretical guide to goal focused coaching). There is a large body of research that coaching has been able to draw from. This includes the mechanics of goal setting and goal attainment (see Clutterbuck & Spence, 2016 for an overview of goal dimensions), the why

of goal setting, and the positive impact of goal attainment on well-being, when a person's core values and interests are reflected in their goals (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998) and they are intrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Greater commitment and effort employed by a person in working towards achieving these self concordant goals (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998), enables their basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness to be met (as explained by self determination theory, SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985), resulting in greater well-being with goal attainment (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). One study, involving one workplace coaching session, has suggested that goal setting in coaching can be implemented in a way that optimizes well-being and effectiveness through raising the level of self concordance (Burke & Linley, 2007).

There is scant research focused on life coaching and the process of goal setting (Grant & Cavanagh, 2014). A few life coaching studies using quantitative measures provide empirical evidence supporting the claim that evidence based life coaching leads to greater personal goal attainment and enhanced well-being (Grant, 2003; Green, Oades & Grant, 2006). Life coaching studies using a cognitive behavioural, solutions focused approach have primarily been focused on goal attainment and the generalised effect of this on hope and well-being (Green et al., 2006), quality of life (Grant, 2003), greater goal commitment and progression, satisfaction with life, enhanced environmental mastery (Spence & Grant, 2007), reduced anxiety, cognitive hardiness and insight (Grant, 2008) rather than an explicit focus on well-being, as noted by both Spence and Grant (2007, 2008). Only one life coaching study has used one-on-one coaching in a real world context (Spence & Grant, 2007) and their findings highlight the benefits of a professional coach, compared to peer coaching.

Considering this research, it seems that increased psychological well-being is not a certain outcome of a goal directed coaching relationship, raising the question about what aspects of the coaching can lead to greater psychological well-being (Grant, 2008). The additional use of qualitative data can provide further insight into the client's and the coach's experience of the goal selection and goal striving process, and help identify what are believed to be the most useful aspects in enhancing goal selection, goal striving and well-being (Green et al., 2006; Grant, 2016).

Current study aims

This study of life coaching, as an applied positive psychology intervention, examined the question: How does an evidence based coaching approach, including the use of the PERMA Profiler, assist the selection of personally meaningful goals and enhance well-being for women at the preretirement phase of life? The primary purpose of this study was to understand the coaching process for clients' goal selection, by obtaining detailed views from the clients and the coach. The aims were firstly, to identify the valued and helpful aspects of the coaching for goal selection, highlighting goal setting theory, secondly, to describe the impact of using the PERMA Profiler (see Appendix) as a tool to introduce well-being theory (Seligman, 2011) into the coaching conversation, and thirdly, to describe the impact of the coaching on well-being.

Methodology

As case studies rely on analytical generalisations (Yin, 2014), multiple cases were chosen to enable the conclusions from one case to be confirmed or disconfirmed by the other cases. A pragmatic orientation was taken with this descriptive multiple case study, using an embedded mixed methods design (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The real life coaching context enabled participants' perspectives to be central to the process, with the practitioner relying on the clients' views of the process, as well as their own reflections. Both qualitative methods and quantitative methods were utilised as the research question required examining processes and experiences as well as outcomes. The secondary role of the embedded quantitative data (PERMA Profiler)

improved the overall design quality by providing extra detail that may not be possible through the collection of qualitative data only (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Participants

A literal replication logic approach to the multiple cases was used with each of the three cases selected because of the likelihood of predicting similar results (Yin, 2014). The three female participants, were recruited through both personal and participant networks. They were all in their early sixties, working in government jobs and contemplating transitioning from full time work. All three were concerned about financial strain in their retirement. They were able to commit to an introductory session (to find out more about their needs and to clarify the coaching engagement, the data collection, and to choose dates and times for the five coaching sessions), five one hour coaching sessions every two weeks and a forty-minute semi structured interview after the final session. All three were interested in exploring and planning for the next stage of their lives, developing goals and an implementation plan. They were also open to reflecting on the coaching experience.

Procedure

Each participant received five coaching sessions. The evidence based coaching drew from goal setting theory, well-being theory and evidence based positive psychology interventions, with a solution – focused, cognitive behavioural approach (Grant, 2003), drawing on tools and techniques to meet the participant's needs. For two of the participants the face-to-face sessions took place at their respective work places. For the remaining participant, the sessions took place at both their workplace and a local café.

Data collection

After the introductory session participants were asked to complete a hard copy of the PERMA Profiler self-report questionnaire and bring it to their first coaching session. The questionnaire was used as a coaching tool and also as a pre and post coaching measure. The debriefing occurred during the first session and focused on how participants felt about the questionnaire, the building blocks of well-being that were important to them and the ones they would like more of. Participants completed the PERMA Profiler again after their last coaching session.

At the end of each coaching session the coach asked the participant what was specifically useful and what the turning points were that led to any insight, clarity or learning. The coach also contributed their perception, with both partners reaching a consensus. The coach then recorded this. The coach reflected on each session, noting key observations and possible useful approaches for the next session. The semi-structured interviews took place at the same venue as the coaching within the week after the last coaching session. They were recorded on an audio device and later transcribed.

To enhance the quality of the research, the practitioner who is at the same life phase, reflected on how they might be influencing the study and was aware of putting their own beliefs and assumptions aside. The introductory session discussion emphasised the need to be honest in answering questionnaires, in reflecting after each coaching session and in the semi-structured interviews. To capitalise on the trust and rapport built by the coaching, and to minimise the possibility of participants wanting to please with their answers, the practitioner was aware of their body language and the need for a neutral stance during the interview. The semi structured, open ended interview questions, reflecting the line of inquiry, were asked in an unbiased manner and guided each interview, resulting in a fluid conversation (Yin, 2014).

The study was carried out in an ethical manner, ensuring the safety of both the researcher and the participants. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms were allocated to participants and used throughout the study.

Data analysis

The qualitative analysis used thematic analysis (TA) to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). After the first interview was completed the six phase guide to performing TA was used to analyse the entire qualitative data set of case one. Both an inductive and deductive approach was used and a number of iterations of the six phase guide (Braun & Clark, 2006) were carried out. The theme and sub theme labels were then revised after revisiting the research question and the goal setting literature, resulting in a tentative thematic map. The second and the third cases were coded inductively and then checked to ensure the codes could be captured with the possible themes and sub themes from case one, seeing if any differences were highlighted.

Each case consisted of the cross case analysis themes and subthemes with their coded data extracts and their individual PERMA Profiler pre and post mean scores. See Table 1 for the merged joint data display. Each participant's pre and post mean scores were compared to see if their perception of their well-being had shifted. The purpose of this secondary data was to provide further depth and understanding to support the qualitative data (Cresswell & Planko Clark, 2011).

Table 1: Merged joint data display

Cross case analysis themes and sub themes							
Themes	Sub themes						
1. Listening and noticing informing coaching decisions	1.1. Awareness of client's change readiness, and well-being 1.2. Space to talk about self, someone to listen						
2. A forward, outcome focus - clarifying, exploring and discovering	2.1. Zooming out and zooming in						
3. Talking and doing – getting started and assuming responsibility	3.1. Commitment and motivation 3.2. The client creating a supportive environment						
4. An interlinked goal hierarchy plan providing direction and motivation							
5. Feeling more positive and more in control of life							
Pre and post PERMA Profiler mean scores							
	P	E	R	M	A	H	N
Nina							
Pre	4	7.6	3.7	9	6.3	6	5.33
Post	6	7.6	5.7	8.7	7.6	5.7	4.33
Cheryl							
Pre	3	4.7	3	4.3	6.3	4	6.67
Post	4.7	6.7	5.7	5.7	6.3	4.7	5
Cara							
Pre	8.7	7.6	9.7	6.3	8.3	4.3	2.34
Post	8.3	7.6	8.3	8	8	6	1.67

Findings and discussion

The PERMA Profiler self rated pre and post mean scores indicate that participants' negative affect decreased, and each participant's valued PERMA elements increased. Positive affect and achievement increased for Nina, positive affect, engagement and meaning for Cheryl, and meaning for Cara. The secondary data, particularly supports the fifth theme of 'Feeling more positive and more in control of life,' and will be discussed in further detail there. The cross case analysis themes and sub themes are presented with key excerpts from each case that also highlight the nuances pertaining to each case.

1. Listening and noticing informing coaching decisions

This theme captures the core coaching skills of listening and noticing and how they informed coaching decisions, therefore it is fundamental to themes 2, 3 and 4, providing the basis for building the goal focused coaching relationship. The data analysis defined the following sub themes.

1:1 A space to talk, someone to listen

All three participants noted how a confidential space to talk about themselves and have someone to listen contributed to the coaching effectiveness. The coaching space enabled participants to talk about personal issues and aspects of retirement that weren't just financial. Cheryl noted that she, "appreciated talking through things and keeping me focused, [...] specifically talking out loud was helpful on this topic of transitioning to retirement. People in my team, this is not on their radar." Nina, who seemed to recognise the effort involved for the coach to be present and focused on the client, highlighted the importance of a safe, non-judgmental space. "I don't talk about these kinds of things to anyone else [...] thank you for all your work and also the acceptance you showed to me."

The opportunity to voice thoughts and have guidance with their thinking was appreciated by Cara, "You let me talk and that was it, voicing my thoughts, am I on the right track and you were able to guide me with my thoughts, by questioning me and helping me clarify." This comment highlights how the presence and focus of the coach enables a reflecting back, interpreting or questioning response, which then assists the client to describe their issue and enlarge their perspective, leading to insight and action (Cox, 2013).

1:2 Awareness of client's change readiness and well-being

The core coaching skills of listening and noticing ensured each session was beneficial to the client by providing the right mix of support and challenge without overwhelming. This pacing with the client is highlighted in the coach's decision about how and when to follow up the PERMA Profiler with the participants. Nina and Cara both reflected on the elements that they valued and what they would like to enhance. Cheryl "wasn't feeling that good" when she did the questionnaire and talked about her tendency to feel overwhelmed. The in the moment decision not to discuss the well-being elements with her, but to help her get unstuck and moving with some action that felt doable, was validated by her end of session comments: "I feel much more hopeful now, and pleased to be working on one of my piles." She "appreciated the coach pushing about the task and helping her with motivation."

Further in the moment coaching decisions were related to noticing participant's stage of change readiness (Prochaska & Norcross, 2001). All participants were ready to focus on their financial picture, but were in the contemplation stage for other goal areas.

These noticings were also part of the coach's post session reflections. For Nina, the building blocks of well-being were "interesting to think about," allowing her to reflect on the elements she valued as well as her feelings of anxiety, being overwhelmed and her desire for more positive emotions in her life. This informed the overarching vision goal reflected back to Nina, of wanting 'to feel calmer, with more energy and enjoyment, and making a difference,' and her response of, "YES! I wish ... the idea of calmness is lovely, but maybe that is just who I am." This comment highlighted her low efficacy in being able to change this, prompting the coach to think about a relevant positive psychology intervention to suggest and when to do so. Taking a savouring expedition (Harrison, Smith & Bryant, 2013) was suggested in session 5, within a well established coaching relationship, receiving a positive response from Nina, taking the information: "I like that, I could do that on my day off - it's like mindfulness, which I'm interested in."

2. A forward, outcome focus - clarifying, exploring and discovering

A forward focused coaching approach provided space for clients to explore and examine, enhance their self awareness, and clarify and organize their thoughts in order to get clear about what they wanted. A general objective or purpose for the coaching had been established and participants didn't feel rushed into looking for quick solutions. Stelter (2016) advocates such an approach describing it as a discovery journey into the unknown, with less focus on specific goals and more time spent on thoughts, feelings and reflection. Here, Cara describes such an exploration in response to what she found effective about the coaching:

When I started it, I thought there's no clear direction where we're going. But after the second or third session, I thought -this is great, because there is no direction I couldn't see it, you probably could. It was like a revelation.

Helping to focus and to clarify were frequently mentioned by all three participants as key beneficial aspects of the coaching. The coach's questions also helped the whole picture evolve, assisting participants to identify an overarching vision goal, to clarify what was clear and not so clear, to identify what they wanted to achieve and to prioritise. Here, Cara talks about the coach's responses and questioning in her comment about what she appreciated about the coaching:

That I've come in with an idea or a thought and I've actually changed it. You've helped me sort of work towards something. [...] I had something in my head and you helped me pull it out [...], by questioning me [...] It gave me that focus [...] the opportunity to question my own thoughts.

2:1 Zooming out and zooming in

This sub theme captures the breadth and depth of the client's exploration, allowing what was important to emerge. The general objective for the coaching provided enough focus for the participants to explore important areas in order to know what they really wanted and to hone in on areas that they were ready to set goals and get moving on. The benefit of zooming out into the future is captured by Nina's comment, "Its valuable to get a larger perspective and looking further ahead, not just bounce from one piece to another." An overarching vision goal was established, capturing how clients wanted to feel and be, highlighting their core values and providing some sense of direction. Here, Cara talks about what is important to her concerning her well-being:

Thinking about aspects of well-being was useful – meaning and purpose, relationships are important and accomplishments – doing things and being active outside the home, having a focus is important to me.

This helped the coach reflect Cara's overarching vision goal back to her, which was to, "Be prepared for the transition and remain relevant and engaged after full time work." The exploration brought out more specifically what she wanted and needed to do, with the how coming out over the five sessions.

Zooming out also gave clients a more expansive perspective by exploring all the parts of their whole picture of functioning well and feeling good. This then helped inform their goal selection. For Cheryl, the picture was helpful, "giving clarity as to what specifically needed to be in her plan. [...] seeing the plan emerge gave me hope." For both Nina and Cheryl this picture was built up and captured in a concept map that helped to "focus the conversation, instill hope and motivate." For Nina the picture of pieces in her life as a concept map was very clear, and aligned to her overarching vision goal. "I would have a fulfilling life after 65 [...] I think I have enough there."

Zooming in not only helped participants get going with the finance area they were all ready to act on, it also helped them understand themselves and the situation and to know what they really

wanted. For example, zooming in on the role of work highlighted Cara's core values, her strengths ("Thinking and talking about you at your best was really good as we don't often do that [...] seeing strengths made me feel proud of my accomplishments.") and what an ideal week might look like after she leaves her current full time work.

3. Talking and doing – getting started and assuming responsibility

Listening, noticing and pacing were crucial in tuning in to when participants were ready to work with more explicit goals. This work involved honing in on the details of the doing, and resulted in the participants establishing clear actions, success criteria and timeframes. Self regulation helps the client make progress towards the task they have set themselves, by monitoring and regulating their progress (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). All three participants appreciated the coaching keeping them on track and helping them get moving on things and to be accountable.

3:1 Commitment and motivation

Participant's commitment and motivation was demonstrated by their initiation of action lists, and their increased focus as their plan emerged and they sensed progress. "I feel less stressed, more energy and focused at the end of the session with a to do list." (Cheryl) This commitment and motivation is also highlighted in participant's future intentions. Nina's comment reflects her intentions and her insight around pausing and noticing to create more calm in her life:

I want to start the savouring exercise on my day off with walking along the beach. [...] I loved just watching the world go by – it was such a lightbulb moment, as we are so attached to our screens. [...] Definitely I would like to do more of that.

Cara highlights the importance of the process and working towards the goal when commenting on how her thinking had changed about preparing for retirement:

The need to get finances all in order and get those big ticket items out of the way before we ease into retirement and not be worried about maintenance on the house. [...]. I'm concerned that we may not get everything spot on before I leave. I know we can work towards it.

3:2 The client creating a supportive environment

A key component in supporting the client work towards attaining their goals was the client creating a supportive environment, giving them the headspace and the physical space as well as time, to make it easier for them to do what is needed, as typified by Cara, "I've started to create comfortable spaces in the home for both of us [...] the budgets and spending forecasts are in place," and Nina's comment:

I've tidied up my own space at home and I am ready to move on to these things [...] Feels like a load has been taken of my mind at home with the clean up and declutter of my workspace. I need to have the headspace to do things and not have my life too cluttered up.

4. An interlinked goal hierarchy plan providing direction and motivation

The interlinked goal hierarchy plan provided all participants with "a more holistic, complete plan, [...] that gives direction and motivation." For Cheryl and Nina the plan also provided hope, highlighting the aspects of agency and pathway (Snyder, 1995) and its positive correlation with optimism, perceptions of control and positive affectivity (Snyder et al., 1991). "Hope is what we all thrive on. This (the plan) is what is giving me hope to getting back to being happy and healthy." (Cheryl)

In such a hierarchy, goals range from more concrete to more abstract (Emmons, 1992) and proximal to distal (Latham & Seijts, 1999). This continuum links together values, goals and specific action steps (Grant, 2012). The more abstract higher order vision goal was clarified for all participants by the end of session 2 and provided a touchstone at the beginning of sessions and “seemed to energise and give clients a sense of direction and expansiveness,” as observed by the coach’s notes. The overarching vision goal, aligned to the participant’s core values, anchored the lower level distal and proximal subgoals, which emerged over the five sessions, as explained by Cara:

The overarching goal is helpful as a focus, then you think how do I achieve that, I achieve that by these subgoals here and realizing that I’m not going to achieve that unless I’ve done these things here.

Higher order goals instill motivation and purpose for moving towards a meaningful destination and are more likely to stay fixed (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Cheryl captures this motivational aspect when discussing her higher order goal, “The overarching vision goal is perfect for me as that is what I need. I would find it hard to control the anxiety if I wasn’t trying to do that goal.” Cara’s response highlights the flexibility with task implementation at the lower order, compared to the more fixed higher order goal (Carver & Scheier, 1998).

It just puts everything in perspective for me, such as the different areas I want to and need to be considering [...] things can change but this is the basis of what I need to focus on moving forward. This gives me the whole picture. It’s a good end product that is useful. (Cara)

For all three participants their goal as to when they would retire became clearer by the fifth coaching session. This is demonstrated in Cheryl’s comments reflecting on the coaching sessions overall:

What has become clear now is how much I want to retire. I thought I will have to work to 67 and what will I miss out on if I retire then [...] but now... I think a year is actually enough. [...]The plan reinforces what I want to do and need to do before I end up too sick to do anything in my life and think wow I spent it working when I really didn’t want to.

All three participants spoke of their goals as being meaningful and motivating with some goals emerging after reflection and enhanced self insight, as suggested by Nina’s comment. Some of their sub goals had some key implementation actions and timeframes, which they found helpful. The whole interconnected picture was appreciated and would help them focus.

The compartmentalising (sub goals) was very good. [...] I hadn’t ever written down all those type of things. If I was to do this myself I would never put self care in – it would be a to do list like finances. (Nina)

5. Feeling more positive and more in control of life

This theme focuses on how participants felt after the five coaching sessions. This includes shifts in mindsets, particularly feelings of control and shaping what happens to them, feeling more positive and aware of impacts on their well-being. Their comments highlight these different aspects:

I feel much more positive about it all. I feel lighter, it’s a weight off my shoulders. (Nina)
I feel so lucky to have had this opportunity. I think it’s important to think it all through and plan for retirement. (Cara)
I would say it’s (well-being) come up a bit. [...] It (the coaching) helped me, it got me moving, it didn’t do everything for me, but me I’m the only one who can move.” (Cheryl)

This enhanced well-being reflects the outcomes of the few life coaching studies undertaken (Grant, 2003; Green et.al., 2006). As Nina's and Cheryl's pre PERMA scores were lower it is not surprising that the improvement in their post scores is more pronounced than Cara's. For Cheryl and Nina the increase in their relationships score could reflect the support they felt from the coaching partnership. Their improved scores for positive affect and lower negative affect, reflect their comments on feeling more positive, energetic and in control. Such positive emotional experiences can build resources and enhance psychological well-being (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002).

I am doing a lot more at home and am a lot more positive at home. I notice it with my motivation. [...] I've noticed this week is that I have been calmer and I have been more measured with the animals. So I'm trying hard to let things go and not come home in a bad mood. (Nina)

For Nina achieving the outcome of a four day week seemed to be very empowering and could be reflected in her increased achievement score. "I felt like I was in limbo and now I feel like I have control of my work pathway [...] I have already noticed that some of the tensions at work have been alleviated." For Cheryl the greater sense of control, of being in the driver's seat as explained by SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and more of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2008) seems to be captured in the following comment:

I used to wake up excited each day but I don't any more. I want to wake up and feel like that and get on with challenging, interesting things. I have an expectation that now that will happen, whereas I didn't before... I just thought you have to get on with it and be ok about -I was resigned to it.

Cheryl's increased PERMA scores across the elements, except for achievement, could reflect her feeling less anxiety and being able to do the things she needed and wanted to do. It would be likely that achievement would increase as she made further progress towards her goals.

I still have some anxiety but it's not as great. [...] I have in more recent times thought oh god don't let me turn into my mother, so caught up in the money that you forget to live your life. [...] What I've noticed is that the things that have fallen down due to depression and anxiety, illness and feeling stiff aren't as bad as they were.

Cara felt more in control of the process of transitioning to retirement, explaining that, "it's feeling more in control, a feeling that I have a much better idea of what is required." Meaning and a sense of purpose after full time work were important for Cara. The coaching helped clarify what provides that meaning and purpose, what was important and what she was currently doing, which could be reflected in the increased PERMA meaning and health scores and her decreased relationships score.

Coaching helped me understand how important family and friends are because I don't have a big family and being involved in my children's lives without becoming overbearing or too involved is important -being a mother and grandmother. I don't think others will see much difference. Hopefully they will see me as more relaxed and getting a bit more involved.

These findings have identified the valued, useful aspects of the coaching that helped to achieve successful coaching outcomes and assisted clients' goal selection, goal striving and well-being, from both the client and the coach's perspective. The themes and sub themes highlight the application of goal setting theory and the science of well-being in an outcome focused, client centred coaching approach. They illuminate the importance of the coach's presence and focus, and the knowledge and skills to support and challenge clients without overwhelming them. Participants benefited from both an explicit focus on specific goals as well as exploration and self reflection, with both higher order and lower order goals serving different motivational functions (Bandura, 1997). The agreed general objective for the coaching enabled the participants to explore important

areas in order to know what they really wanted, and to hone in on areas where they were ready to set goals and start action.

The PERMA Profiler debriefing informed the development of an overarching vision goal, aligned to the client's valued well-being elements. This vision goal seemed to energise and broaden their thinking. A concept map helped the participants to develop a complete picture of what their life would look like if everything was functioning well and they and others close to them were feeling good (Oades & Passmore, 2014). This visual helped participants see the links between areas, and the links to the PERMA elements (Oades & Passmore, 2014). From this they were able to identify priorities, which resulted in their valued goal hierarchy plan, consisting of their overarching goal and a range of proximal and distal goals that emerged. This interconnected plan provided participants with direction and motivation to make changes, and to transition to working less.

Over the five coaching sessions, participants enlarged their view of their situation, reprioritised self care, and addressed their financial fears. Participants felt more positive and in control, and more aware of the impacts on their well-being. This is reflected in their self rated, post lower negative affect scores and their post higher scores on the PERMA elements they valued and wanted more of. The results reflect research suggesting that people select more self concordant goals when they are clearer about their values and interests and they are likely to put more effort into attaining them, positively impacting their well-being (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999).

This study illustrates how coaching can better prepare women for the transition to retirement by addressing their fears around doing so, and helping them to build a larger picture of a fulfilling life, raising their awareness of the impacts on their well-being and helping them to develop a goal hierarchy plan. These findings support a previous study suggesting that programs that help women to cope better with their fears around retirement could help them focus more on the opportunities presented at this life stage (Sherry, Tomlinson, Loe, Johnston & Feeney, 2016). This study suggests that coaching, enabling clients to review, reflect, prioritise, and set and pursue meaningful goals, using the lens of the PERMA well-being elements, is beneficial during preretirement. As previous studies have identified goal flexibility and goal pursuit as consistent indicators of well-being in retirement (Kubicek et al., 2011), such an opportunity in preretirement, could enable further resourcefulness in individuals as they move into retirement.

Conclusion

The study highlights the use of goals and how they emerge during a number of coaching sessions. It also highlights how coaching as a goal focused relationship (Grant, 2014) can have an intentional focus on well-being. Well-being assessments used flexibly to assist the client's inquiry have the potential for opening doors to conversations that may otherwise take longer to get to and provide a shared language to talk about well-being throughout the coaching. This study makes a compelling case for coaches to experiment with ways to be client centred and intentional about introducing the different pathways to well-being and helping clients reflect on what is important to them. This can assist clients to select more self-concordant goals to work towards that are likely to increase their well-being, whilst enhancing their well-being literacy.

Future coaching studies with female pre-retirees could focus on goal selection, goal striving and achievement, and expand the PERMA debrief by discussing positive psychology interventions options for the PERMA elements clients would like to enhance. Studies could also focus more on changes in participants' well-being literacy, as well as their efficacy with goal directed behavior. Inevitably, this research design has some limitations to consider. The replication logic used for the three cases is a strength, however, additional cases would only make the findings more robust. More than three cases in a real-life coaching context though, is not always practical.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the scant literature on life coaching, as an applied positive psychology intervention, and the goal setting process. It shines a light on the goal selection process with an intentional focus on well-being, and the benefits of coaching for women at the preretirement phase of life. The findings highlight both an explicit focus on specific goals, as well as exploration and self-reflection, showing how goals emerge, and how the PERMA Profiler can be debriefed to focus on well-being pathways and what the client values, informing an overarching vision goal, and an holistic picture of functioning well across key life domains. The findings, suggesting that participants found the coaching empowering, felt more positive, more aware of the impacts on their well-being and more in control, provide a case for investigating how such coaching opportunities can be made available in the workplace to women who are at the preretirement phase of life.

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About the authors

Mary Louise Fogg started her professional career as an educator and later trained as a coach, recently completing a Masters in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology. Her private coaching practice supports individuals who are contemplating retirement.

Appendix: PERMA Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016)

A1	How much of the time do you feel you are making progress towards accomplishing your goals?	0 = never, 10 = always	Block 1
E1	How often do you become absorbed in what you are doing? ^[SEP]		
P1	In general, how often do you feel joyful?		
N1	In general, how often do you feel anxious?		
A2	How often do you achieve the important goals you have set for yourself?	0 = terrible, 10 = excellent	2
H1	In general, how would you say your health is?		
M1	In general, to what extent do you lead a purposeful and meaningful life?		
R1	To what extent do you receive help and support from others when you need it?		
M2	In general, to what extent do you feel that what you do in your life is valuable and worthwhile?	0 = not at all, 10=completely	3
E2	In general, to what extent do you feel excited and interested in things?		
Lon	How lonely do you feel in your daily life?		
H2	How satisfied are you with your current physical health?		
P2	In general, how often do you feel positive?	0 = never, 10 = always	5
N2	In general, how often do you feel angry? ^[SEP]		
A3	How often are you able to handle your responsibilities? ^[SEP]		
N3	In general, how often do you feel sad? ^[SEP]		
E3	How often do you lose track of time while doing something you enjoy?	0 = terrible, 10 = excellent	6
H3	Compared to others of your same age and sex, how is your health?		
R2	To what extent do you feel loved?		
M3	To what extent do you generally feel you have a sense of direction in your life?		
R3	How satisfied are you with your personal relationships?	0 = not at all, 10=completely	7
P3	In general, to what extent do you feel contented?		
Hap	Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?		
		0 = not at all, 10 = completely	8

Scoring:

Scores are calculated as the average of the items comprising each factor:

- Positive Emotion, P = mean (P1, P2, P3)^[SEP]
- Engagement, E = mean (E1, E2, E3)^[SEP]
- Relationships, R = mean (R1, R2, R3)^[SEP]
- Meaning, M = mean (M1, M2, M3)^[SEP]
- Accomplishment, A = mean (A1, A2, A3)^[SEP]
- Overall Well-being PERMA = mean (P1, P2, P3, E1, E2, E3, R1, R2, R3, M1, M2, M3, A1, A2, A3, hap)
- Negative Emotion, N = mean (N1, N2, N3)
- Health, H = mean (H1, H2, H3)
- Loneliness, Lon (single item)