What does coaching have to offer to young people at risk of developing mental health problems? A grounded theory study

Liz Robson-Kelly & Christian van Nieuwerburgh

Objectives: This study sought to identify what coaching psychology has to offer young people at risk of developing mental health problems.

Design: The study used a semi-structured interview design and self-reflective data analysis within a qualitative approach.

Method: Grounded theory was employed to analyse the transcripts and self-reflective data from coaches and young people and to build a series of descriptive and conceptual codes, and in the creation of a theoretical model.

Results: The study results in a theoretical model, which suggests the experience of coaching creates a process, a positive relationship and a set of skills where the young person, through growing accountability, awareness and responsibility, develops choice and control over their thoughts, feelings and behaviour. This helps them to deal with their situations.

Conclusions: The study results in an initial theoretical model to assist with the application of coaching interventions, targeted specifically at young people at risk of developing mental health problems. It provides a tentative theoretical understanding that requires further research.

Keywords: positive education; positive psychology; coaching psychology; group coaching; coaching relationship; adolescence; mental health; intervention and prevention.

Introduction

Mental health problems in young people are increasing globally (Kieling et al., 2011). Most recent UK figures from 2005 showed levels of anxiety and depression in teenagers increased by 70 per cent in 25 years (Mental Health Foundation (MHF), 2005) and that one in 10 children and young people have a diagnosable mental illness (Green et al., 2005). However, almost a decade on, problems are still significantly common (Hagell, Coleman & Brooks, 2013). Keyes, Dhingra and Simoes (2010) state current methods of prevention through risk reduction have not reduced the burden of mental illness; they suggest the promotion and protection of mental wellbeing through increasing positive mental health and protection against loss. There is an urgent need, from a public health (Bramesfeld, Platt & Schwartz, 2006), society (Coote, 2012) and economical and moral (DH, 2011) perspective, to understand appropriate interventions that protect (DFCSF and DH, 2008) and develop mental wellbeing of at risk young people.

Positive psychology has taken steps forward into introducing effective interventions in educational environments to improve the mental wellbeing of young people (Miller, Nickerson & Jimerson, 2009). Applications of Seligman’s (2011) multidimensional wellbeing theoretical model, PERMA, are being integrated into whole school interventions to improve mental wellbeing (Kern et al., 2014; Noble & McGrath, 2008; Norrish et al., 2013). Coaching Psychology has been proposed to be an application of positive psychology (Madden, Green & Grant, 2011; van Nieuwerburgh & Green, 2014). Coaching psychology has been shown to improve the mental wellbeing of children (Madden, Green & Grant, 2011) and adolescents (Campbell and Gardner, 2005; Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007; Torbrand & Ellam-Dyson, 2015). Pritchard and van Nieuwer-
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burgh (2016) suggest that participating in programmes that integrate these two approaches contributes to an improved perceived quality of life for at risk young people. However, there has, to date, been no research into the effectiveness of coaching psychology interventions specifically targeted for young people at risk of developing mental health problems.

Through this research, the aim is to start to demonstrate what coaching psychology has to offer at risk young people, and to create a theoretical understanding of ‘how particular interventions work so that the ingredients can be harnessed’ (Sutton, 2007, p.567) that could shape the way targeted preventative interventions are created and delivered. This qualitative study starts to establish research into coaching interventions for at risk young people, while contributing to the broadening field of coaching psychology research.

**Literature review**

**Positive psychology and mental health prevention**

Positive psychology turns its focus away from the disease framework to one of optimal functioning, wellbeing and human strengths (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology programmes, used in educational settings, have been suggested to improve mental wellbeing, social skills and life satisfaction for young people (Proctor et al., 2011; Seligman et al., 2009). Positive psychology interventions are relevant to consider for at risk young people to help them develop positive emotions as an important aspect of mental wellbeing (Fraser & Blishen, 2007; Garcia, Vasiliou & Penketh, 2007; Sin, Della Porta & Lyubomirsky, 2011). The PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011) defined in five domains: positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M) and accomplishment (A) has recently been suggested to be applicable to the field of positive education (Kern et al., 2014).

**Coaching, young people and mental health**

Coaching psychology can operate in the boundary between coaching and therapeutic approaches traditionally used in mental health interventions. Coaching has been generally accepted to work with non-clinical populations (Grant, 2007). However, between 25 and 50 per cent of individuals presenting for coaching fell into clinical mental health criteria (Green et al., 2005; Spence & Grant, 2005). Prevalent coaching psychology approaches applied to improve mental wellbeing use a solution-focused, cognitive behavioural coaching methodology (Campbell & Gardner, 2005; Grant, 2003; Grant, Green & Rynsaardt, 2010; Green et al., 2005, 2007; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005; Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008; Spence & Grant, 2005), suggesting coaching psychology has wider applications than working with non-clinical populations.

One-to-one coaching with adolescents has been proven to be effective in school environments both for holistic life coaching and for academic performance (Campbell & Gardner, 2005; Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007; Passmore & Brown, 2009; van Nieuwerburgh & Passmore, 2012) and moving young people with moderate mental health towards flourishing (Keyes, 2003). On this same spectrum, at risk young people could be considered to be at the lower languishing (Keyes, 2003, 2006) end, that is, they have low mental health without elevated levels of mental illness. The period of languishing is a crucial time to intervene and increase levels of subjective wellbeing (Keyes, 2006) in order to protect mental health and prevent mental illness developing. Coaching psychology, therefore, has potential to move people up the health spectrum of Keyes’ (2005) dual mental health model. Demonstrating that coaching could be used as an accessible option to improve mental wellbeing at a targeted early stage by improving health, which could offer an alternative approach to risk reduction (Keyes et al., 2010).

**Interventions for improving wellbeing**

The development of relationships (Browne et al., 2004; Horowitz & Garber, 2006; Stewart, Reid & Mangham, 1997), along with...
social support from peers (Southwick et al., 2006), social wellbeing (Rath & Harter, 2010) and social connectedness (Bond et al., 2007) have been demonstrated to be essential elements for the mental wellbeing of young people. Noble and McGrath (2008) created the Positive Educational Practices (PEP) framework and Norrish et al. (2013) created Geelong Grammar School Model of Positive Education, which provide models for improving young people’s wellbeing. These models, between them, include positive relationships, social and emotional competency, positive emotions, and engagement. Madden, Green and Grant (2011) demonstrated the potential for strengths based coaching to improve the wellbeing of young people transitioning from primary to secondary school. Green, Oades and Robinson (2012) advocate greater integration of coaching and positive psychology in an educational setting for student, staff and whole school wellbeing, and van Nieuwerburgh and Green (2014) suggest coaching is an applied positive psychology that could help develop mental toughness in young people. Pritchard and van Nieuwerburgh (2016) have started to generate interesting findings on how coaching and positive psychology interventions are of benefit to at risk young people. However, more research is required into the validity of these methods and approaches.

School-based, targeted, small group interventions of social and emotional learning (SEL) have proven effective at improving the emotional and social development of adolescents (Barrett, Webster & Wallis, 1999). The UK Resilience Programme, (Challen et al., 2011) did make a short-term impact on mental wellbeing where lasting impact was identified in children whose symptoms of anxiety and depression and needs were greater at the start of the programme. Horowitz and Garber’s (2006) meta-analysis also concluded that selective prevention programmes were found to be more effective than universal. This demonstrates that, although positive psychology and social and emotional interventions have demonstrated potential to support at risk young people, it is perhaps the specific targeting of the intervention that is essential to its success. This is explored through the concept of vantage sensitivity (Pluess & Belsky, 2013).

Coaching relationships for improving wellbeing
Positive relationships have been identified as an important element of subjective wellbeing (Hefferson & Boniwell, 2011; Seligman, 2011). The role of a positive relationship with a caring, trusted adult is a key factor in mental health promotion and prevention for at risk young people (Browne et al., 2004; Campbell & Gardner, 2005; Roth et al., 1998; Sutton, 2007). What could be defined as ‘positive’ relationship that is developed through coaching is important to the overall effectiveness of coaching (McKenna & Davis, 2009). De Haan (2008) identified that it is the coaches’ qualities and how they contribute to the development of the coaching relationship that are valued by coachees. Further studies have emphasised trust as a vital element in developing the coaching relationship (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007; Lai & McDowell, 2014; O’Broin & Palmer, 2010; Passmore, 2010), suggesting that the qualities and ability of the coach to develop a positive coaching relationship could have a lot to offer at risk young people.

Young people identify the relationships provided by peer support as essential to the development of their mental health (Fraser & Blishen, 2007; Garcia, Vasilious & Penketh, 2007; McNeil, Aylott & Pengi, 2012). It could be suggested that encouraging the development of positive relationships through peer support could be beneficial to the mental health of young people. Research into peer coaching and particularly how this encourages the development of positive peer relationships has been shown as highly beneficial to young people (Pritchard & van Nieuwerburgh, 2016; Short, Kinman & Baker, 2010; van Nieuwerburgh & Tong, 2012).

Targeted group coaching with A-level students demonstrates the importance of peer support in reduce procrastination and
avoidance behaviours, specifically for young people identified to have these traits (Torbrand & Ellam-Dyson, 2015). Group life coaching programmes for adults have proven to enhance wellbeing and improve the quality of life (Green, Oades & Grant, 2005; Rolö & Gould, 2007; Spence & Grant, 2005), increase confidence and positive outlook, and challenge social isolation (Grajfoner, 2009). Therefore, group coaching could provide at risk young people with a safe place to experience and develop supportive peer relationships that enhance wellbeing.

This research starts to develop an understanding of the coaching tools and techniques at risk young people find helpful. While also looking at how the application of this intervention including the coaching and group relationship contributes to its helpfulness to at risk young people. This begins to make coaching psychology and positive psychology accessible for vulnerable young people, while at the same time contributing to the wider field of coaching psychology research.

**Research design**

An important part of the process of creating a grounded theory is to acknowledge assumptions (Birks & Mills, 2011). The research question was constructed in such a way as to remain as broad as possible, within the assumption that coaching has something to offer at risk young people. This assumption has been evidenced by the research into coaching psychology with children and adolescents (Campbell & Gardner, 2005; Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007; Madden, Green & Grant, 2011).

The research took place within the researcher’s own coaching practice, a social enterprise which supports vulnerable young people through positive education programmes as defined by Green, Oades and Robinson (2012). This research method involved action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). The young people involved in the study had already worked with the researcher; a helpful approach in this instance, as the young people involved in the research were vulnerable. The relationship between the young people, the organisation, the researcher and coaches contributed to generation of data, while ensuring the participants were safe and ethical guidelines were upheld, both within coaching and research guidelines.

In order to answer the research question, the method of GT requires theoretical sampling, as recommended by Birks and Mills (2011) with vulnerable young people. Although there was little hazard or risk to the young people, due to the research’s focus on the experience of the positive coaching intervention, because of the age and vulnerability of the participants, attention was given to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of participants and confidentiality of the data. The participants were between 13- and 17-years-old; they were invited to be involved in the research towards the end of the intervention. Parental consent had previously been obtained for them to participate in the coaching interventions, consent to take part in the study was discussed verbally and signed
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consent was provided by the parent and young person. Checks were made to ensure the participants did not feel coerced into taking part. Participants were free to withdraw at any time. The participants involved in coaching programmes had undergone rigorous checks in line with organisational safeguarding policies and procedures. Ethical approval was sought and granted though the Research Ethics Committee at the University of East London (UEL).

The young people were invited following completion of group positive education programmes and individual coaching programmes. To be involved with the research to form a theoretical sample group, the young people were all known to each other so the rapport and relationship between the groups was helpful to the data collection process. Initial iteration of participants was young people of both genders aged 13 to 17 within the research cohort and included those who had experienced symptoms of anxiety and/or depression and those who exhibited self-harming behaviours. One young person was on the autistic spectrum and another had a medical diagnosis of mental illness.

Initial data collection and coding (Birks & Mills, 2011) took place through two focus groups and one semi-structured interview (see Table 1). Semi-structured interview questions (Appendix 1) were developed to focus on the young person’s experience of the coaching intervention. The focus groups/interview were conducted by the author who already had worked with the participants through the delivery of the coaching programmes. The focus groups and interview were recorded and transcribed as well as field notes written. The data was coded and analysed using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and memo writing, this led to the generation of initial categories.

The data provided several categories and a development of the relationship between them which included the perception of the intervention, application of the intervention, coaching relationship, tools and techniques young people found helpful and how they applied them. A second iteration (see Table 1) of analysis of 80 pieces of self-reflective evaluation forms from 68 individuals that had taken part in the coaching programmes further developed the researchers’ understanding of the tools and skills gained by young people and resulted in a matrix of the skills and tools young people gained and awareness of how these are being applied in young people’s lives (see Table 3).

In order to discover the coaches’ perceptions and experience of the coaching interventions and what they had to offer young people, a third iteration (see Table 1) involving semi-structured interviewing with three coaches was completed. Two of the coaches had facilitated group positive education programmes and individual coaching with young people and one had completed individual coaching sessions. The research conducted in the first two interactions was not shared with the coaches to avoid any influence over their contribution to the study.

Memo writing throughout enabled the creative process, reflexivity, theoretical sensitivity and objectivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This combination of different data sources created a triangulation of data analysis and assisted in the generation of the core categories and the emergence of a theory and tentative model. The tentative developmental model was then shared with six colleagues in the field of coaching who, in most cases, provided minor feedback and felt the model was an accurate reflection of coaching at risk young people. However, two coaches advised that, in addition, the model could potentially show movement through process of change more clearly. This feedback was combined with further comparative analysis and developed the model into one which could be used to engage young people into the coaching intervention through explaining and making it accessible, and resulted in the final model being produced (Figure 1). This model was then shown to three of the young people interviewed in iteration 1, who found the model to be an
Table 1: Research process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Age and Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Iteration 1</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5 female aged 15</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>YP1 YP4</td>
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<td>YP2 YP5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>YP3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 female aged 13</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>YP6 YP8</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 female aged 14</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>YP7</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 male aged 16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Individual interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 male aged 15</td>
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<td></td>
<td>YP9</td>
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<td><strong>Iteration 2</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Group coaching</td>
<td>Written evaluation by</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>46 female</td>
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<td>self-reflective logs</td>
<td>young person</td>
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<td>22 male</td>
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<td>aged 13 to 17</td>
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<tr>
<td>One-to-one coaching</td>
<td>Written evaluation by</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6 female</td>
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<tr>
<td>self-reflection</td>
<td>young person</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 male</td>
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<td>aged 13 to 17</td>
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<td>(14 were from the same individuals</td>
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<td>asked to reflect on two occasions)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creation of tentative coaching tools</td>
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<td><strong>Iteration 3</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>All female</td>
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<tr>
<td>with coaches</td>
<td>C1 C2 C3</td>
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<td><strong>Completion of tools matrix and</strong></td>
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<td>creation of model</td>
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<td><strong>Iteration 4</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tentative model sent to feedback</td>
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<td>from colleagues x 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amended coaching model created,</td>
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<td>based on feedback and further data</td>
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<td>comparative analysis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Model discussed for fidelity with</td>
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<tr>
<td>three of the young people interviewed</td>
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<td>in Iteration 1</td>
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</table>

accurate representation of their experience of the coaching intervention and that it could have applicability to other young people outside of the study.
What does coaching have to offer to young people at risk of developing mental health problems?

Figure 1: A model for coaching young people at risk of developing mental health problems.

I have gained...
A range of strategies I can use to deal and or cope with my situation.
Greater choice and control of how I want to think, feel and behave.
More confidence
I feel...
better, happier and less stressed.

Context - Coach able to view the young persons world objectively in order to support the young person effectively develop strategies and accountability for themselves.

Application of the intervention - Combination of group and individual coaching which is engaging, fun, varied, adaptive, meets the needs of young people. This supports them to learn and experience new skills and strategies.

Relationship includes - Trust, non judgment, equality, positivity, perspective, challenge, belief and hope for them, listening and asking rather than telling.
Results
The results suggest that coaching could have a considerable amount to offer young people at risk of developing mental health problems. Through the process of constant comparison, the categories emerged; these consisted of three main categories: context, application of the intervention, and outcome of the intervention, that is, what coaching offers at risk young people (see Table 2). Each of the three categories is subdivided into sub category themes and sub themes. These findings could provide a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon that could support wider research and support the development of coaching programmes and interventions that help vulnerable young people.

Tools and techniques used to support at risk young people.
The study demonstrated that the participants in this study enjoyed a varied approach which is made accessible for them. Having a range of tools, techniques and a place to experience them, through a group or with a coach, offers young people a range of strategies to use in their individual situations. The participants in the interviews and the self-reflective feedback referred to specific tools and how they helped them. These tools and skills fell into three interrelated categories, communication and interpersonal skills, self and emotional awareness and thinking skills. Table 3 demonstrates the tools and techniques and how these strategies are applied by young people.

The results suggested that part of the process of engaging young people in coaching interventions involved ‘explanation’. The findings from this study have resulted in an accessible model, which could be used to help explain what coaching is (see Figure 1), highlighting a potential use for the model beyond this study. When the model was shown to three of the young people interviewed for the study, they expressed how it could be helpful in explaining coaching to them while providing a focus point to help build the coaching relationship so they don’t feel ‘pressurised’. C3 referred to using steps as a way to explain various different ideas to young people such as ‘how layers of trust build up’. Using steps in the model came out of the data and also demonstrated the way the skills and knowledge build on each other once the coaching relationship is in place. The process of moving through the steps and developing skills and strategies helps young people improve communication, interpersonal skills, self and emotional awareness and thinking skills. The context is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Categories</th>
<th>Sub Categories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>For Coach</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>For Young person</td>
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<tr>
<td>Application of the intervention</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Practical application</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Individual coaching</td>
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<td>Group coaching</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Skills</td>
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<td>Relationship</td>
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<td>Outcomes of the intervention</td>
<td>For self</td>
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<td>For others</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Choice</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Communication</td>
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What does coaching have to offer to young people at risk of developing mental health problems?

Discussion
The results suggest that, theoretically, coaching psychology has much to offer young people at risk of developing mental health problems. The study indicated coaching interventions are generally seen by young people and coaches to be ‘helpful’, ‘enjoyable experience’ and skills learnt ‘useful’. The study suggests that young people benefit from the process of coaching, the experience of the intervention, the coaching relationship and the skills they develop. Taking part in a group, individual and coaching positive education programme (Green, Oades & Robinson, 2012) was seen as helpful for developing communication, interpersonal skills, strategies and the confidence of vulnerable young people, findings also discovered by Torbrand and Ellam-Dyson (2015). This type of intervention can equip young people with a range of helpful strategies: improved emotional and self-awareness, which results in greater sense of choice and control, increased confidence and feeling ‘happier’. Pritchard and van Nieuwerburgh (2016) also discovered similar outcomes for the young people in their study. These acquired skills and strategies can help young people deal with or cope with the challenging or difficult situations they might be in.

The study offers further understanding of the integration of coaching psychology and positive education as a potential application of positive psychology, enabling young people to experience and develop skills which align with four out of five domains of Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model. Throughout the discussion, coaches will be referred to as C1, C2 and C3. Statements made by young people in the focus groups and interviews will be referred to as YP; each young person has been given a number 1 to 9.

The context
All three coaches in the study showed that they were aware that the context of the situation is something that could influence and impact on their ability to effectively coach at risk young people. A balance is maintained by the coaches between need for support and managing the coaching process and relationship. In order to support the young person most effectively, the coaches were ‘able to see the world through their eyes and remain detached from it to support them with a mix of empathy and objectivity’ (C1). The study suggests the ability to remain objective is necessary for coaches to support at risk young people ‘it could be easy to get lost in the problem story and what is happening’ (C1). The coach offers an opportunity help the young person with ‘ownership, accountability, responsibility so they learn to trust themselves and their own judgements’ (C3) this is something that the coach establishes with the young person.

Engaging young people into the coaching relationship
Young people’s prior perceptions of the coaching intervention range from fear of the unknown, apprehension, concern, to ‘worth a try’ (YP3). Coaches facilitate engagement through ‘building that relationship’ (C3) explaining in accessible ways and developing a shared understanding with young people ‘we can work through what it is and isn’t together, set a way of working’ (C1). A technique also employed by Campbell and Gardner (2005).

The study suggests that being engaged into the coaching process starts building trust (O’Broin & Palmer, 2010), which the data suggests is important for at risk young people ‘we got to know each other which made us trust you more and want to open up more’ (YP1). The word ‘trust’ came up 23 times in the coaches’ transcriptions. Trust is seen as a factor in mental health problem prevention by Sutton (2007) and Browne et al. (2004). Coaches are aware that their coaching rela-
relationship might be one of the few trusting relationships an at risk young person has had. They may have trusted people in the past that has seriously let them down especially adults or a peer (C2). This is something to value and develop, ‘it might take a teen longer to trust you than an adult’ (C2), ‘Building that relationship, being trusted’ (C3). Passmore’s (2010) GT study also identified trustworthiness as an attribute of the coach, and O’Brien and Palmer (2010) and Gyllensten and Palmer (2007) also highlight trust as a vital component of an effective coaching relationship.

The coaching relationship
The relationship between the group and coaches developed through the intervention was seen as helpful, friendly and comfortable ‘you could see people getting happier… so you feel comfortable’ (YP2), giving young people a chance to ‘know’ it is helpful and safe to ‘open up’, ‘you can see other people being relaxed around them so you know it’s ok to say stuff you don’t have to keep it all in’ (YP1).

The study suggests the coach’s relationship with the young person provides an opportunity for young people to experience positive relationships, Coaches referred to the relationship as ‘critical’ to the success of the intervention (de Haan, 2008; Grant & Spence, 2011; McKenna & Davis, 2009) and something both the young people and coaches were aware of, both emphasised the importance of spending time building a relationship and a shared understanding.

The coaching relationship is viewed positively by all participants, in addition to objectivity and trust, the study shows the coaching relationship also includes equality, positivity, listening, questioning skills, belief in the young person, non-judgement, openness, (Lai & McDowall, 2014) all of which creates a comfortable, engaging and safe space for young people ‘we talk a lot because we’re comfortable’ (YP1). In order to create this type of relationship, coaches in this study demonstrate certain traits, which include an adaptive, integrative approach, a range of styles to fit the young person’s needs, friendliness, empathy and challenge. The study highlighted that coaching offers the chance for at risk young people to experience having a positive, supportive relationship with a trusted adult (Campbell & Gardner, 2005). The study suggests this is the very least coaching offers along with a chance to learn a range of tools and strategies and experience trying them out.

Application of the intervention
Firstly, the study demonstrated that this type of intervention offered the participants an opportunity to meet and be with people that are ‘similar to you’, ‘so you don’t feel alone’, a similar finding also discovered by Torband and Ellam-Dyson (2015). Developing positive relationships through social support and group coaching is something Grajčoner (2009) has suggested as supportive in managing mental health problems. Sin, Della Porta and Lyubomirsky (2011) propose that positive psychology interventions bring more success when a person has a supportive social network, highlighting that participating in group coaching programmes provides a helpful opportunity for young people to experience and develop positive relationships and social networks.

Through the intervention, young people develop and experience strategies that help them feel confident. The intervention also provided a place to try out them out, providing a ‘chance to look at people and other strategies people use’ (C1), ‘you would have been listening in… they would have opened your eyes ‘cause it does help an awful lot’ (YP7). For young people the data suggests that having some evidence, seeing and knowing it is working encourages them to try out self-changing strategies (de Haan, 2008).

In addition, experiencing and trying out new perspectives and ways of thinking in a safe, positive and supportive environment gives young people ‘a chance to remove yourself from situations to think about the solutions’ (YP3) giving them a place to ‘work out different coping strategies and a way to deal with the things in their life’ (C2).
What does coaching have to offer to young people at risk of developing mental health problems?

The coaching intervention offers a place to experience positive emotions (Frederickson, 2009). Fun, awe, hope, passion, pride and interest were all referred to in the study, indicating coaching as a potential method of application of the positive emotion as a tool for developing mental wellbeing in young people (Kern et al., 2014; Norrish et al., 2013; Pritchard & van Nieuwerburgh, 2016). The sessions were interactive and varied involving games and different types of activities to remain an engaging experience to be involved in, again aligning with Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model.

The study suggests individual coaching sessions offered a more personalised way of helping young people, which was seen as more transformational by coaches interviewed. However, some young people preferred group interventions. The appropriateness of individual or group coaching is a case of personal preference and learning style for individuals. However, all the young people and coaches interviewed said that a combination of a group positive education programme and individual coaching, in order to gain the benefits from both styles of approach, had been the most effective intervention, ‘when you’ve had a group and you go and do really good work with them on a one to one, that’s when the penny drops and they run with it’ (C3). ‘Our shining example was X and that was 10 sessions of coaching and the group coaching, as much as I was saying the group doesn’t give them change what it does give them is confidence’ (C2). ‘From the group work I learnt there is other people like that and the confidence... and then from here (individual session) I learnt the motivation strengths thing’ (YP9).

Interrelated tools and skills young people find helpful

Table 3 lists the specific tools and techniques used in the coaching group and individual sessions. These align with other positive psychology and coaching interventions with young people (Campbell & Gardner, 2005; Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007; Madden, Green & Grant, 2011; Pritchard & van Nieuwerburgh, 2016; Rolo & Gould, 2007; Short, Kinman & Baker, 2010; Torbrand & Ellam-Dyson, 2015).

Developing accountability

Findings from this study show young people are aware that the tools and techniques developed are something they apply themselves ‘I can now have situations and decisions that I can now use to cope with things’ (YP6), ‘they realise the ownership is on them to go away and implement the things they have spoken about’ (C3). The skills and knowledge learnt are seen as useful. Young people felt that even if what they had learnt was not useful now it would be ‘useful in future’ or helpful for other people to know and that they would be able to help others by having access to this knowledge. This highlights that coaching at risk young people could create a ripple effect and that the strategies learnt could be applied later in life, again an area for further research.

What the young person gains through coaching

The study suggests experience of coaching creates a process, a relationship and a set of skills where the young person, through growing accountability, awareness and responsibility, develops choice and control over their thoughts, feelings and behaviour, which results in increased confidence. Clough and Strycharczyk (2012) propose control, both emotional and over their life, along with confidence, are components for developing mental toughness. This would suggest that coaching interventions for vulnerable young people could help to develop these components of mental toughness.

Perceived control over environmental factors was a result of Spence and Grant’s (2005) study, the same phenomena appeared in this study. The word ‘deal’ appears 31 times in the data and ‘cope’ 13 times. Young people and coaches both reported that young people are more able to ‘cope’ and/or ‘deal with situations’ as an outcome of the coaching interventions.
### Table 3: Coaching Tools Matrix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>What this offers young people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Communication and Interpersonal Skills | Tools:  
- Body language  
- Communication skills  
- Understanding types of behaviour  
- Other people's perspectives  
- Feedback and compliments  
- Relationship with coach or group | Application:  
- Learning to share problems  
- Communicating more effectively  
- Understanding other's points of view  
- Making more friends  
- Accountability for how they behave towards others  
- Not feeling alone  
- Increased confidence  
- Helping others apply skills, e.g. offering advice, sharing positive strategies |
| Self and emotional awareness | Tools:  
- Understanding confidence  
- Recognising strengths  
- Honesty  
- What's going on in their worlds, e.g. wheel of life tool  
- Trust building activities  
- Comfort Zones  
- Labelling, e.g. how the labels impact them  
- Responsibility  
- Understanding and labelling different feelings and emotions.  
- Responsibility for feelings  
- Stress management  
- Experiencing and recognising positive emotions | Application:  
- Able to recognise strengths and positives in self  
- Feeling more confident  
- Participating more  
- Feeling better, calmer, less stressed  
- Feeling happier  
- More honest  
- Trusting self and others  
- Believing in self  
- Improved positive self-image  
- Taking responsibility for self  
- Understanding, controlling and expressing feelings and emotions  
- Thinking before reacting  
- Opening up  
- Using coping strategies such as breathing, relaxation or time out  
- Being in control |
| Thinking Skills               | Tools:  
- Awareness of thoughts and thinking  
- Recognising positives, e.g. what went well  
- Gaining perspective and reality checking  
- Challenging and changing unhelpful thinking, e.g. reframing or scaling  
- Goal setting  
- Distraction techniques for unhelpful thinking, e.g. thought stopping | Application:  
- Picking out positives in situations and self  
- Changes to thinking  
- Being more positive  
- Believe in self  
- Setting own goals  
- Being motivated  
- Changes to behaviour, such as increased engagement, talking more and taking action |
What does coaching have to offer to young people at risk of developing mental health problems?

There is an understanding from the coach and the young person that the young person has to do the work to change their situation or, if that is not possible, manage how they deal with it, which fits De Haan’s (2008) relational coaching theory, building the components of control and confidence (Clough & Strycharczyk, 2012), while offering an alternative to prevention through removal of risk factors (Keyes et al., 2010). This also helps develop a sense of accomplishment, also part of the PERMA model, ‘I’ve got more motivation to proceed on in life’ (YP9), ‘I set my goal for the day that’s gonna make me happy’ (YP1), ‘it makes you feel more positive about the future’ (YP4). This suggests that although accomplishment is not something directly referred to in this study it appears to be something the young people experience through applying the skills and strategies learnt through the coaching intervention.

The ‘meaning’ domain from the PERMA model does not arise from this study, Kern et al. (2014) proposed that how adolescents develop meaning requires further understanding. They suggest that adolescents may gain meaning through their associations with others and that meaning overlaps with relationships for young people. Pritchard and van Nieuwerburgh (2016) start to build on this theory through their findings that relationships are valuable to young people’s ability to identify purpose and meaning to life. This indicates that the coaching relationship and developing interpersonal skills through learning and experiencing skills and strategies through the application of intervention is a chance for young people to develop meaning as well as relationships, essential for developing multidimensional wellbeing and something that requires further research.

Limitations

The study has a number of limitations that should be taken into consideration. The study produced a considerable amount of data from a range of sources, including a theoretical sample of vulnerable young people and self-reflection questionnaires, which were not designed for the purpose of the study and were part of the intervention itself. Therefore, the data might hold more detailed information that could share further insights into what coaching has to offer at risk young people. The research questions and subsequent interview questions made an assumption that coaching had something to offer at risk young people. However, two of the semi-structured questions paid specific attention to any limitations or negative aspects that could affect young people through coaching ‘Was there anything you didn’t like?’ and ‘Was there anything unhelpful?’. Most responses to this was no or nothing was unhelpful, although one young person did express that the journey of becoming more self-aware can be uncomfortable process ‘why couldn’t I notice these on my own, you feel… a bit ashamed of yourself’ (YP1). These findings were also discovered by Torbrand and Ellam-Dyson (2015) offer a potential area for further research.

The study was an action research study, some of the participants the researcher had coached previously, therefore, it is possible that they may have been trying to please the researcher; however, the use of constant comparison with written data, coaches’ interviews and young people’s interviews have allowed the theory to emerge from a range of sources, helping strengthen the development of the theory.

The model is a simple representation of a complex process which, although useful in making the theories accessible, it could be seen as over simplified and not explaining the multidimensional complexities of the coaching experience, skill and process. The research was new to the use of grounded theory and followed a less prescriptive, realist approach (Glaser, 1992), which has not allowed for the constructivist approaches to GT (Charmaz, 2006). It is a hope of the researcher that this pragmatic, simple approach could contribute to the field of coaching psychology, with potential for further research methods including qualitative studies in future.
Further research
The resulting theoretical model requires further testing with different populations, including young people who are not at risk of mental health problems, to develop transferability for wider application. Elements of the model could be analysed through quantitative research, for example, to demonstrate quantifiable improvements to wellbeing and if they are sustained over time. Pritchard and van Nieuwerburgh (2016) start to build on this theory through their findings, which significantly overlap with this model. Various aspects such as the group coaching or individual coaching elements of the intervention require further comparative research to discover if it is the group, the peer support, the professional coach or the combination of all that is the ideal intervention for at risk young people and how these compare with therapeutic or non-coaching social approaches such as counselling, mentoring or youth development programmes.

This study generates a theory that suggests that coaching in this instance could be an applied positive psychology. However, as intervention was an integration of coaching psychology combined with positive psychology, further study of the individual elements would be useful to compare whether it is the coaching or the positive psychology which proved helpful to at risk young people. Further understanding of the model is necessary to discover if it is pertinent to wider applications of coaching such as with families (Allen, 2013), parents (Bamford, Mackew & Golawski, 2012) and schools (Green, Oades & Robinson, 2012; Norrish et al., 2013), or simply a starting point for further research into coaching for young people at risk of developing mental health problems.

Conclusion.
This study has resulted in an initial model of understanding of what coaching could offer young people at risk of developing mental health problems based on the experiences of the young people involved in this study. Excitingly, these theoretical findings are also synergistic with the closest related qualitative studies by Pritchard and van Nieuwerburgh (2016) and Torbrand and Ellam-Dyson (2015). A suggested application is that this model could be used as a framework to check current interventions or applications of support for young people. More broadly the model could be used as a resource explain coaching to coaches, trainee coaches or young people. This has wider relevance for coach training programmes especially for coaches who are interested in working in youth or education sectors, whilst also having wider applications for developing practical applications of coaching skills for people who work with young people including educators, pastoral support, youth workers and others around them such as parents and peers. The creation of this theoretical model has generated helpful insights into how coaching works with these particular vulnerable young people which could suggest wider transferability of the model and various aspects within it.

It is a hope of the authors that this study is a starting point for further research, providing useful suggestions for developing coaching interventions and practical applications, that could support vulnerable young people to improve mental wellbeing and prevent mental health problems developing.

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What does coaching have to offer to young people at risk of developing mental health problems?

References


Appendix 1

Semi-structured interview/focus group questions

What did you think when you found out about the referral for the coaching programme from (school, youth worker, etc.)

Did you like the coaching programme?
- What did you like?
- What have you found helpful?

Was there anything you didn’t like?
- Was there anything unhelpful?

Have you used anything you learnt from the coaching programme?
- How did you use it?
- How has that helped you?
- What are the top three things you learned that helped you?

Has what you learnt impacted on your life?
- In what way?
- Have you noticed anything is different/ changed?
- Has anyone else noticed any changes, friends, school, or family?

What would you tell other people about the programme?
- Friends
- Family
- Teachers

What sentence or word would you use to describe the programme?

How does the coaching programme compare to any other support you might have had?

What would you like your support services to be like?