

# A Coaching Approach to Enhancing Wellbeing in Mentoring Through Transformative Learning

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Mentors can enhance wellbeing and self-actualization by employing coaching and positive psychology approaches guided by the lens of transformative adult education theory. Mindfulness, positive emotions, and solution-focused coaching foster wellbeing, building resilience, self-regulation, and reflective practice. This synthesis offers a novel integration positioning wellbeing and coaching in the context of transformative adult learning and mentoring. Emerging adults face rising demands for adaptability in complex work and learning environments, highlighting the need for holistic, sustainable strategies to support personal transformation and development. Mentors with this coaching approach offer this critical support to mentees and foster developmental networks.

*Keywords:* Coaching, positive psychology, wellbeing, transformative learning

## Introduction

Wellbeing is a vital issue in higher education and for those working with emerging adults. Emerging adulthood is a time of critical development that shapes the trajectory for success. Mentoring relationships have long been a vital part of learning in adulthood. Mentoring offers an opportunity beyond formal classroom or workplace learning to nurture Seligman's (2011) elements of wellbeing: positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment (PERMA). Cultivating a culture of formal and informal mentoring relationships with emerging adults, facilitates formation of developmental mentor networks. Coaching approaches informed by positive psychology and neuroscience provide mentors evidence-based insights, enhancing the impact of mentoring experiences for emerging adults and their mentors.

First, the population of emerging adults will be discussed to understand the unique context of this demographic and how coaching supports their development. Next, the literature review examines insights from wellbeing as defined by positive psychology, the neuroscience and psychology of coaching, transformative learning, and the application of each of these in coaching. An argument for and discussion of this coaching approach to mentoring follows.

## Literature Review

### Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood, typically encompassing ages 18 to 25, bridges the completion of compulsory education and the assumption of self-sustaining adult responsibilities (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). This demographic has achieved adult physical maturation and is approaching maximal brain

development of the prefrontal cortex. Emerging adulthood is characterized by identity exploration, establishing independence and preparing for future adult roles, including family, financial and career obligations (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). This stage includes pursuing higher education, training, and career exploration. Familial and societal support for education and travel highlights the collective investment in this developmental phase. Exposure to diverse experiences and critical thinking foster individuation and changes in perspective.

Mentoring, particularly with a coaching approach, effectively supports emerging adults navigating novel and complex experiences. This approach leverages this critical period of neural readiness to promote executive skill development for goal-directed behavior. A coach facilitates a client-centered transformative learning experience through a dialogic process of inquiry and reflection. This process provides opportunities for expanding self-awareness and strength awareness, and through critical reflection, clients evoke new solutions to develop essential executive skills of metacognition, planning, and emotional regulation (Atad & Grant, 2021; Guare & Dawson, 2013; Sammut, 2014). Executive skills are brain-based abilities, controlled by the prefrontal cortex, essential for engaging in goal-directed behavior, such as working memory, sustained attention, response inhibition, emotional regulation, flexibility, task initiation, planning and prioritization, organization, time management, goal-directed persistence, and metacognition (Guare & Dawson, 2013). These skills develop through practice as the brain grows over the first three decades of life. Executive skills can be taught in developmentally appropriate ways (Guare & Dawson, 2013). Practicing these skills early and often is beneficial, as the brain prunes unused synapses during development, meanwhile myelination strengthens the speed and ease

(habituation) of most used neural pathways (Guare & Dawson, 2013). Neuroplasticity demonstrates the brain's ability to learn and change over the lifespan. However, the surging brain development and (re)wiring that begins in early adolescence and ends in the twenties completes the significant brain development where it has achieved mature adult status and stability (Guare & Dawson, 2013). A coaching approach to mentoring uniquely supports emerging adults, as it develops executive skills, thereby nurturing the reflection and goal-directed persistence toward self-concordant possible selves necessary for thriving in adulthood.

## Wellbeing

Rather than merely the absence of ailments, Seligman (2011) affirmatively defines wellbeing as thriving and flourishing, holistically integrating hedonic and eudaimonic aspects through the PERMA model. The PERMA model of positive psychology provides a framework for achieving wellbeing through five identified domains: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). Affirmatively defining wellbeing and the elements to cultivate it creates agency in manufacturing wellbeing and the conditions conducive to flourishing. Wellbeing also offers protective factors that shield, reduce, or support recovery from illness and psychopathology directly contributing to resilience. Each element of PERMA, described below, offers a key to cultivating wellbeing and this integrative coaching approach provides mentors insights to support wellbeing in mentees.

Positive emotions incorporate hedonic wellbeing, feelings encompassing joy, love, pleasure, gratitude, optimism (positive perspective on life), and peace (Seligman, 2011). Coaching affirmations and appreciations, coaching psychology (positive emotion attractor) and broaden-and-build theory cultivate and capitalize on positive emotions creating an effective and motivating coaching relationship (Boyatzis & Jack, 2018; Fredrickson et al., 2008). Positive emotions are often stumbled upon by happenstance without agency and self-determination; however, Fredrickson et al. (2008) studied mindfulness, specifically metta, a loving-kindness meditation, to cultivate positive emotions. This intervention proved very impactful, which is empowering as a strategy with immediate positive impact that only increases with duration and frequency of practice (Fredrickson et al., 2008).

Engagement describes being in flow or the right blend of challenge and inspiration that merges action and awareness, the cognitive and the emotional, such that one delights in being absorbed in the activity (Seligman, 2011). While the absorption and lost-in-the-moment experience is not guaranteed, coaches strive to cultivate a challenging and encouraging environment where skill and interest meet and are stretched, customized to the mentee. Hollweck (2019) presented mentor-coach engagement

as intrinsic motivation, continued professional learning and growth, with coaches reporting invigorating opportunities for improvement in their coaching skills. This exemplifies a mentor-coach's critical reflection, engagement, meaning and accomplishment.

Relationships address our need for positive social bonds and interconnectedness; evidence shows quality and one's assessment or perceptions matter more than quantity (Seligman, 2011). Cultivating positive relationships with family, friends and community is necessary for flourishing (Seligman, 2011). An ethic of care and developing a positive relationship are central to coaching, offering opportunities for both the coach and mentee to benefit. Authentic relationships are necessary to foster transformational learning (Mezirow & Taylor, 2010).

Meaning is finding a sense of purpose in life through contributions such as work or volunteering, or through a transcendent or spiritual connection, perspective, or practice (Seligman, 2011). In the coaching relationship, self-defined, personally meaningful goals are discussed, engaged with, visioned, selected, and focused upon with plans for goal-directed action.

Accomplishment speaks to self-actualization, the pursuit of excellence, achieving goals, experiencing a sense of mastery and competence (Seligman, 2011). Coaching has been proven to increase goal attainment; coaching focuses on self-actualization, growth, developing skills and celebrating successes on the road to accomplishing goals (Grant, 2012). Development of executive skills is an integral part of coaching, and fundamental to accomplishment in PERMA.

Examining the elements of the PERMA model illustrates how a coaching approach to mentoring informed by positive psychology, transformative learning and the psychology and neuroscience of coaching contributes to wellbeing.

## Conceptual Paper: A Coaching Approach to Mentoring

Having a mentor is a powerful learning opportunity for an emerging adult to flourish. Still having a mentor is not enough; negative experiences can have an adverse impact contributing to stress, anxiety, and hopelessness (Hollweck, 2019). Mentoring is unique to each individual, with each person bringing their own idea of what a mentoring relationship entails. Coaching is similarly unique, yet advances a goal-oriented, inquiry-based, transformative relationship for mentee self-actualization. A coaching approach to mentoring centers the mentee and provides mentors an effective framework with skill and direction.

Coaching is an established approach to mentoring. A meta-analysis found best practices in mentoring included a growth mindset focus, offering broad support, and a reciprocal relationship (Kelley et al., 2023). As Basher (2024) and Hollweck (2019) affirm, the mentor as coach

relationship is distinct from guru, friend, advocate, and cheerleader. Mentor as coach relationships are grounded in a supportive, reciprocal dynamic where the mentee feels safe, affirmed and trusting (Hollweck, 2019). This authentic relationship and holistic orientation allow for open dialogue, and critical reflection on experiences necessary for transformative learning, while providing the benefits of positive relationships in the PERMA model.

Neuroscience and psychology enlighten coaching approaches with evidence-based insights. Boyatzis and Jack (2018) use neuroscience to gain insight into effective coaching approaches and found coaching with compassion (approaching coaching toward the positive emotion attractor (PEA)) more effective than the typical coaching for compliance (approaching coaching toward the negative emotion attractor (NEA)). PEA activates neural networks of “big picture thinking, engagement, motivation, stress regulation, and parasympathetic modulation” revealing the mechanisms engaged with coaching to support personal development (Boyatzis & Jack, 2018, p.11). PEA engages the ability to scan for possibilities, openness to other people and new ideas, and a creation of the sense of safety whereby people are inclined to face rather than flee challenges (Boyatzis & Jack, 2018). This resourcefulness exemplifies Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory, which posits positive emotions have a compounding positive impact on one’s life, building social bonds and personal resources (Fredrickson et al., 2008). The broaden aspect speaks to the expanding effect positive emotions have on human thinking and attention allowing for high-level connections, widened range of perception, mindfulness, giving and receiving support emotionally, and physical health including fending off illness (Fredrickson et al., 2008). This social, emotional, and physical resilience, found in the broaden-and-build theory and neurobiology of PEA activation, further facilitates one’s ability to grow in the face of adversity.

Defining and coaching toward the mentee’s ideal self-propels self-actualization, goal-attainment, and transformative learning. Goal setting can be a transformational experience and catapult learners toward self-actualization. Upon committing to a goal, attention is channeled toward the goal and away from irrelevant activities (Grant & O’Connor, 2018; Latham, 2004). Boyatzis’s Intentional Change Theory asserts a foundational driver of sustaining one’s desired change is engaging in one’s ideal self, a well-defined personal vision (Boyatzis & Jack, 2018). Therefore, coaching toward the mentee’s self-determined vision and goals increases activation of neural pathways, facilitating motivation, engagement, and sustained goal-directed behavior. Thus, fostering the conditions for self-actualization.

Kelley et al. (2023) propose mentors explore possible selves to engage best practices while recognizing and adapting to the specific needs of first-generation students. Possible selves

conceptualize who one seeks to become and who one seeks to avoid becoming (Kelley et al., 2023).

Considering Boyatzis and Jack (2018) ideal self and PEA findings, integrating these overlapping concepts with the findings from the neuroscience of coaching, this mentoring approach can be updated and engaged more skillfully. Boyatzis and Jack (2018), Kelley et al. (2023), and Mezirow and Taylor (2010), discuss emergence and exploration of new possibilities and new perspectives. Through the coaching process the mentor can nurture ideal possible selves.

Building on Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions and solution focused coaching, Grant and O’Connor (2018) examine what coaching approach is most effective, determining positive affect (PA) with solution-focused (SF) coaching to be more effective than either alone; problem-focused (PF) coaching is less effective than, SF, PA or SF + PA. Broaden-and-build theory demonstrates positive emotions leads to positive changes in self-efficacy, capacity and behavior including executive skills (Grant & O’Connor, 2018). SF invokes future emotion states with a primary focus on descriptions of concrete behavior while PA focuses on gratitude practices, engagement of strengths, and savoring congruent with mentee values for both wellbeing and goal attainment of mentees (Grant & O’Connor, 2018).

All four approaches to coaching positively impact clients. However, SF + PA induction provided optimal effectiveness for wellbeing and goal attainment (Grant & O’Connor, 2018). This runs contrary to conventional approaches focusing on fixing problems, which highlights the contribution of this approach. These findings align with the neuroscience evidence on the efficacy of coaching to the PEA and positive psychology’s PERMA model and broaden-and-build theory.

Mentors must be cautious not to coach for compliance or to replicate the mentor in the mentee (Boyatzis & Jack, 2018; Kelley et al., 2023).

Mentees need windows and mirrors, through a developmental network of mentors so they may see themselves reflected as well as see where they are going, what is possible and what possible selves they want to explore and with which mentor. The coaching approach avoids the pitfalls cautioned and supports learners in a positive, visionary, transformative process. The nature of coaching is supporting mentees in identifying and advancing toward their ideal selves through a process of inquiry and reflection on one’s perspectives and experiences. This is transformative learning.

Coaching neuroscience and psychology provide guidance on how to facilitate this most effectively. Transformative learning theory in adult education is a framework to understand the iterative coaching process in context as well as its reciprocal nature.

### **Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning theory centers learners as multifaceted people in a social, political, cultural, and economic context. Learners are

active participants, with learning occurring when fundamental changes to their schema are made based on new experiences, a disorienting dilemma, and critical reflection (Mezirow & Taylor, 2010).

This challenges the learner to construct a more updated understanding of the world. Emerging adulthood is a crucial period to nurture these changes, as mentees gain increased access to executive skills, self-awareness, and self-direction (Sherman, 2021). This lays the foundation for further experiences of transformational learning.

Mezirow's transformative learning theory describes 10 phases learners experience: a catalyst for change (disorienting dilemma), self-examination, critical assessment, recognition of the conflicting paradigms (discontent and need for change), exploring options, planning action, acquiring knowledge, trying new roles, building competence in their new role, and reintegration into everyday life based on new perspectives (Mezirow & Taylor, 2010). Six elements are necessary to facilitate transformative learning: experience, critical reflection, dialogue, a holistic orientation, awareness of context, and an authentic practice (Mezirow & Taylor, 2010).

The coaching relationship is a transformative learning process. Coaches cultivate a transformative learning environment with these elements. Coaches honor the mentee's self-expertise by starting with the mentee's experience. The mentee initiates a coaching experience for myriad reasons; however, there is catalyst for change to engage in the coaching relationship (Sammur, 2014). The mentee's experience and self-expertise are the touchpoints for engagement in the inquiry and dialogue elements. Inquiry and reflection are central to effective coaching engagement. Critical reflection challenges assumptions, revises schema, examines new perspectives, and actively engages with these to create new knowledge. This process involves conflicting feelings, thinking and behavior which are part of the transformation process for developing new perspectives. Both coaches and mentees experience this transformative learning process in the coaching relationship (Hollweck, 2019; Sammut, 2014). This challenging process is facilitated through discourse as dialogue within the coaching relationship (Sammur, 2014). When the source of discontent is recognized and shared with others, internal transformation begins. Expanding possibilities and being exposed to alternatives – such as mentoring's exploration of possible selves and coaching's visioning of the ideal self – nurtures critical reflection on beliefs and clarifies values (Boyatzis & Jack, 2018; Sammut, 2014). Coaching's humanistic approach engages all ways of knowing, including affective and relational, within a holistic orientation (Sammur, 2014). The change process is more affective, relational, and experiential than rational. The mentee is encouraged to explore, develop awareness, and create meaning in a safe, coercion-free, and evaluation-free environment centered on their interests (Sammur, 2014).

Coaches need an awareness of context to fully understand the mentee and support them in

understanding themselves in context (Sammur, 2014). An appreciation of individual experiences, as well as social, economic, cultural, institutional, and political context, is necessary for transformative learning to occur.

Lastly, all of this is possible in an authentic relationship. Coaches intentionally craft genuine relationships with presence, integrity, depth, meaning, and high standards for safety and trust (Sammur, 2014). Sammut (2014) found coaches foster transformative learning by cultivating a sense of safety in the relationship, accepting the mentee, maintaining coach presence, creating a judgement-free zone, asking deep questions for thought-provoking inquiry and critical reflection, challenging assumptions, providing accountability, actively listening, and modeling. All six of the elements that foster transformative learning are integral to the coaching process.

## Discussion

A mentor is an expansive role with many interpretations. Basher (2024) offers a model of archetypes organized by two spectra: the power dynamic (hierarchical versus communal) and the purpose (career versus psycho-social). In this model, coaching spans the spectrum of purpose from career to psycho-social with a self-defined goal yet flexibility to broaden, and Basher (2024) characterizes it as relatively hierarchical because the coaching dynamic does not switch positions. Master or guru is a more hierarchical archetype with the mentor being the sage, whose insight and wisdom is imparted to the mentee (Basher, 2024). This positions the mentee as dependent on the guru as opposed to cultivating self-efficacy, critical thinking, and transformative learning. It also puts the mentor in a place of solving the mentee's problems and trying to change the mentee, which can lead to compassion fatigue, burnout, and tension in the relationship when the mentee asserts autonomy (Boyatzis & Jack, 2018).

The power of coaching lies in the dynamic co-created between the coach and mentee, where the mentee is the expert and authority on their own life. Goals are determined based on what is relevant to the mentee. The coach engages, focuses, evokes, supports, and holds accountability for the iterative reflection process in goal-directed action (Grant, 2012; Sammut, 2014). When learners are actively involved in designing their learning (co-creation), Suliman et al. (2025) found positive wellbeing impacts on the domains of the PERMA model. Further, when compared, true partnerships where learners had meaningful input on designing their learning outperformed pseudo-partnerships (Suliman et al., 2025). These findings reinforce the powerful impact of shared power and respective expertise in the coaching relationship. Coaching centers autonomy and true partnership with the mentee, while the process offers accountability, focus, timely feedback, affirmations, and care (Latham, 2004; Sammut, 2014). This accountability is not punitive or extrinsic, so the client's values,

strengths and motivations are centered. Coaching increases goal-directed behavior, resilience, and solution generation, while reducing stress, anxiety, and depressive moods (Atad & Grant, 2021).

Positive psychology offers means to create and extend positive emotions through mindfulness, savoring, and achievement. Coaches can facilitate this through engaging mindfulness activities. Savoring is integrated into this coaching model with drawing out the ideal self, visualizing benefits of the goal, practicing gratitude, and reflecting on learning, past positive experiences, and accomplishments, as well as celebration, affirmation, and validation in the coaching relationship. Trust recurred as essential for coaching and transformative learning, and PEA coaches were perceived to be more trustworthy, caring, and inspiring (Boyatzis & Jack, 2018). Therefore, mentors can confidently engage in positive, constructive effective coaching practices, thus facilitating access to impactful developmental mentoring networks for emerging adults.

### Limitations and Future Research

This conceptual paper warrants validation through empirical research on mentoring with this coaching approach integrating coaching and wellbeing psychology with adult learning theory to cultivate resilience and flourishing. Future studies should further explore practical interventions, including mindfulness and savoring, and investigate the potential for this approach to support individuals impacted by marginalization.

### Conclusion

Integrating coaching psychology, neuroscience, transformative learning, and positive psychology provides a framework for mentors to guide mentees toward their desired possible selves. Mentors with a coaching approach intentionally share power, explore the mentee's ideal possible selves, support the mentee's goals and development of executive skills, engage in solution-focused coaching with the PEA, cultivate positive emotions, and use the PERMA model and transformational learning theory to guide the experience. This interdisciplinary approach empowers mentors to confidently deliver effective, transformative experiences to emerging adults at this critical stage of life.

In the authentic practice of transformative learning, both mentors and mentees engage as adult learners, generating mutual learning. Mentors gain meaningful personal and professional development, including leadership opportunities, and holistic understanding of diverse environments and individuals through perspective taking (Astrove & Kraimer, 2021; Hollweck, 2019).

These benefits inspire reverse mentoring, where experienced individuals seek more junior or diverse individuals to engage in discourse for fresh ideas and perspectives. This coaching approach to mentoring offers guidance to address the need for

increased mentor training to improve mentor self-efficacy (Astrove & Kraimer, 2021).

In conclusion, the integration of positive psychology, adult education, coaching psychology, and mentoring offers a robust framework for mentors to enhance wellbeing through informed practice. This research underscores mentoring with a coaching approach as a reciprocal adult learning process. The mentor as coach approach emphasizes an interdisciplinary philosophy centered on positive emotions, directional orientation, open curiosity, and a nonjudgmental paradigm. This framework optimizes learning experiences for mentors and mentees and equips mentors with an evidence-based approach to maximize effectiveness.

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