
A Study on the Impact of Life Coaching in enhancing the potential of young adults with diagnosis of Autism to better manage transitions

Introduction

This study explores the effectiveness of life coaching as a developmental intervention to enhance the potential of students with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to manage transitions. Transition to adulthood is often a challenging time for many young people and this is especially true for this student cohort due to the triad of impairments often characterised by the diagnosis. There is currently limited research into the use of coaching as a developmental tool used in the empowerment of people with autism within higher education in Ireland. This article captures the outcome of a small research study conducted to explore how four individual sessions of life coaching could enhance self-awareness, self-perception and goal attainment skills amongst this student category, to manage better the transition to college and engagement in the college environment.

What is meant by diagnosis of Autism?

Autism is often described as a neurological condition of pervasive developmental delay which can present in many different ways and to varying degrees, Attwood (2007), Baron-Cohen (2008) and Wing (2002) state that, to be diagnosed with ASD, the person must show deficits in the areas of social interaction, social communication and social imagination.

The term Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) has been a topic of debate in recent years as a result of changes in the DSM-5. In the new DSM-5, Asperger Syndrome/ High Functioning Autism has been re-categorised under the umbrella term of ASD. For the purposes of this study the client group had a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome, ASD Non-ID. Non-ID denotes an IQ of 70 or over. A lack of social and emotional reciprocity may affect individuals living with Asperger Syndrome in a myriad of different ways. Mathematically, there are over 100,000 combinations of the symptoms that result in a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome. This means that any two people who have a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome may behave differently; they are unique individuals and should be treated accordingly (Hagland and Webb, 2009).

Irish Autism Action states that common attributes include a lack of empathy, limited ability to form relationships and fixations with a special interest. All of this impacts on individuals' experience in education and in particular in transitioning to higher education where negotiating the new academic and social norms can present many challenges for students on the spectrum.

What is Life Coaching?

Life coaching is a professional practice which aims to help people flourish in life, by living according to their strengths, striving to reach goals, and achieve well-being in all areas of life.

Life coaching is a process focused on collaboration and solutions, in which a coach assists and facilitates

an individual in achieving his or her goals and improving his or her life (Grant, 2003; Green, Oades, Grant, 2006). In essence, coaching is the professional practice of collaborating with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process to maximise potential. The most common objective for coaching is to gain new insight and create new habits as clients move toward a more fulfilling and flourishing life.

Life coaching has roots in positive psychology, as the coaching process focuses on an individual's strengths (and builds on those strengths) and the positive parts of one's daily experience (Govindji & Linley, 2007)

Coaching is distinct from mentoring, therapy, and teaching. Coaching is future oriented and focuses on working with a non-clinical population to achieve specific goals and work through steps needed to achieve those goals, whereas therapy focuses on pathology, clinical populations and presenting problems and diagnoses. A coach-client relationship is viewed as an equal partnership, whereas there is an expert-novice relationship in mentoring and teaching (Griffiths, 2005).

Managing Transitions

Managing the transition to college can be a major challenge for most students and in particular for students with a hidden disability such as Asperger Syndrome.

Students experience a large number of stressors, including financial difficulties, academic struggles, career indecision, personal issues, and relationship conflicts. Even though life coaching has been growing considerably, the presence of coaching in higher education contexts is minimal (Griffiths, 2005). Some empirical research has been completed with specific populations of college students that helps to prove the effectiveness of life coaching. The researcher in this study was influenced by Geller & Greenbergh (2009) who conducted a study with college students on the autism spectrum, and found that life coaching positively influenced their emerging sense of independence and aided goal attainment.

The Research Study

This study aimed to explore the impact of life coaching, as a developmental tool in enabling students with a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome to better manage the transition from school to college eight participants were identified; six males and two females. Four life coaching sessions were delivered to each individual student and an assessment was undertaken pre and post the life coaching sessions to ascertain levels of self - awareness, self - perception and goal setting ability.

The most important aspect of supporting an individual with Asperger Syndrome is to build trust and rapport with them. This mirrors with the essence and centrality of life coaching which identifies the importance of putting people first and showing respect for the individual in the coaching relationship.

The Life Coach in this study has over 30 years' experience of supporting people with disabilities in an educational context and has many years of professional experience in facilitating the empowerment of young people with a diagnosis of ASD. She also has specific postgraduate qualifications in Coaching and Coaching Psychology and in Social and Vocational Rehabilitation.

The Life Coach utilised a person-centered positive psychology strengths based approach to coaching, as part of this research. Positive psychology literature indicates the benefit of such an approach. Put simply, positive psychology is the study of strength and virtue (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, Positive Psychology: An Introduction, 2007, p.7). A client-centered approach requires that a life coach focuses specifically on the strengths, positive behaviours and purpose, all of which inform individual development and performance improvement.

Participants were asked to participate in an interview utilising a semi-structured questionnaire upon commencing the coaching process to:

(a) describe positive and negative aspects of how living with a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome affects their life experiences and sense of self

and

(b) outline what major obstacles they experienced when navigating any change/ transition.

Once the coaching process ended, participants were asked to again complete a semi-structured questionnaire to identify any changes as a result of the coaching experience.

Each participant also completed a numeric scale tool of 1 (indicating lowest) and 10 (highest) to identify level of self-awareness and level of confidence in achieving goals. These scales were completed at the beginning and end of the coaching process so that a quantifiable development could be measured.

Semi-structured interviews are a recognised way of allowing an interviewee to communicate freely and easily (Newton, 2010). This was especially relevant when interviewing the participant with Asperger Syndrome in this study. The Life Coach through her many years of professional work in the field of education, disability and life coaching established rapport and trust easily with the student and this helped to maximise the outcome of the interview process with each participant pre and post the life coaching experience.

Research Study Results

The results of the study demonstrated both quantifiable and qualitative improvements in the lives of the eight participants following the strengths based person-centered positive psychology coaching approach, delivered over four sessions to each individual. Upon interview prior to the coaching experience 6/8 participants indicated that the diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome impacted on their ability to communicate with others, as well as on self-awareness and self-management skills in setting and achieving goals. After completing four coaching sessions, respondents reported a degree of improvement in confidence, a greater understanding of self-awareness, and ability to set and attain goals when broken down into small action steps. The Life Coach focussed on the Coaching Growth Model in the life coaching sessions and worked with individuals depending on their specific needs and abilities to break down the challenges to transition from school to college into very small manageable action steps.

Data from the Numeric scale used to capture Pre and Post Life Coaching Data in level of Self- Awareness and Confidence in achieving goals as defined by participants

Participant	Gender	Perception of Self Awareness before Coaching		Perception of Self Awareness after Coaching		Confidence to achieve goals before Coaching		Confidence to achieve goals after Coaching	
		(PBC)		(PAC)		(CBC)		(CAC)	
1	Male	PBC	5	PAC	7	CBC	5	CAC	7
2	Male	PBC	4	PAC	6	CBC	3	CAC	5
3	Male	PBC	3	PAC	3.5	CBC	2	CAC	3
4	Male	PBC	6	PAC	7	CBC	5	CAC	6
5	Male	PBC	4	PAC	5	CBC	4	CAC	6
6	Male	PBC	3	PAC	4	CBC	4	CAC	5
7	Female	PBC	5	PAC	6	CBC	5	CAC	7
8	Female	PBC	4	PAC	6	CBC	4	CAC	7

Analysis of the Outcome of the Research Study

Prior to the coaching experience, the level of self-awareness captured in numeric scale was 34/80. This increased to 44.5/80 after the 4 individual coaching sessions with each participant capturing a numeric scale increase of 10.5. There was also a quantifiable increase demonstrated by participants when they completed the numeric scale for goal attainment from pre to post coaching experience. The overall unit increase here across male and female was 14. The value of the study was further captured in the personal growth identified in the qualitative data captured from individuals in the post-life coaching interviews.

Qualitative Data captured in Post Interview with Participants

Theme 1: Impact of Coaching on developing Self-awareness

All participants who participated in this research reported difficulties with self-awareness, particularly focusing on negative self-beliefs. Overwhelmingly, however, seven out of the eight participants indicated that the coaching experience helped them to deal in a better way with their diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome with respect to self-awareness. Participants reported that they now focus on their strengths and abilities as opposed to the negatives associated with their condition. One participant indicated that he was now 'able to have meals with peers, instead of eating in his bedroom', indicating the level of difficulty that those diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome experience with communication and social interaction. The level of difficulty with communication experienced by an individual with Asperger Syndrome permeates every basic task. Many participants reported that they deal with this difficulty through avoidance. This avoidance reinforces the difficulty with communication and reinforces the negative self-belief that was evident pre-coaching also. One participant summarised his growth in self-awareness following the life coaching experience by stating 'I used to shut everyone out; that was my way of coping. Now, I don't feel so weird'. Research states that remediating negative thinking is crucial. Finding ways towards positive states of mind is key to supporting those living with Asperger Syndrome (Goodyear, 2008). Goodyear also states that coaching provides an accessible support that meets the needs of the individual. It is important that it is intensive and lasts for a duration of months, at least. This is perhaps the most significant drawback of the current study where, given the constraints of time, a more lengthy coaching process was not possible. However, in a short space of time, it is evident that new belief systems were created and levels of self-awareness increased.

Theme 2: Confidence in Setting Goals- Pre and Post Life Coaching Analysis

In the quantifiable numeric scale participants confirmed a scale of 32/80 in terms of confidence in setting goals prior to the coaching experience. This increased to 46/80 after completing the coaching process. This demonstrated a quantifiable scale increase of 14 units. The researcher feels that this may be directly correlational to increased focus on self-belief and strengths of the individual. In cases where the level of goal setting did not significantly improve, participants stated that, with additional coaching sessions, it would allow for further development in this area. All participants commented to the benefit they experienced in breaking down goals into small action steps and having to show accountability as key to attaining goals. This was a skill emphasised in the coaching sessions. The utilisation of strengths based coaching techniques and solutions based coaching tools further embedded this learning for the participants in the study.

Recommendations and Conclusions of Research Study

As indicated in the literature review at the beginning of this study, there is limited research to date in the provision of life coaching as a developmental intervention for people with disabilities and specifically for those with a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome in an Irish context. The results of this study indicate significant qualitative and quantitative data accounting for improvements that have occurred as a result of the coaching process.

When the Life Coach utilised a strengths based person-centered coaching intervention with participants, focusing on ability rather than negativity regarding disability of Asperger Syndrome; improvements were seen in the area of self-awareness, social cognition, goal setting & goal attainment. These are key skills for managing life transitions for all students and in particular for students with a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome, ASD Non-ID.

Griffiths, 2005 stated that the learning that occurs during life coaching is informal, skills-based, and experiential and the positive outcomes have the potential to impact an individual's life long-term and, if sustained, can assist in the pursuit of a better quality of life.

Further research is required in this area in order to fully understand the impact of Asperger Syndrome and the issues experienced by individuals on the spectrum in managing transitions. An in-depth study using case study analysis would be appropriate. Additional coaching time is also required. All eight participants reported a positive coaching experience and stated that they would engage in the coaching process again.

The author of this study would like to conclude by using a quote from renowned coach, Timothy Gallwey in his book *The Inner Game of Tennis*; (1986)

Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It's helping them to learn rather than teaching them.

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