

Approaching solutions or avoiding problems? The differential effects of approach and avoidance goals with solution-focused and problem-focused coaching questions (Katharine Braunstein and Anthony M. Grant - Coaching Psychology Unit, School of Psychology, University Of Sydney, NSW, Australia)

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Aim of study

The prevalent recommendation in coaching practice literature is that asking **Solution-focused (SF)** questions is more effective than asking **Problem-focused (PF)** questions. However very few studies have tested this assumption (Grant, 2012 ; Theeboom, Beersma, & Van Vianen, 2015) while no research has empirically tested the effects of **Approach vs. Avoidance goals** and their interaction with SF and PF questioning. This paper explores effectiveness and interactions among these issues by formulating three hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: SF compared to PF questions
- Hypothesis 2: Approach goals compared to Avoidance goals
- Hypothesis 3: Interaction between coaching questions and goal types

Background

SF approaches

Deriving foundational links from counseling, psychotherapy and family therapy (de Shazer & Berg, 1997) SF approach emphasizes the client's personal strengths and resources to focus on future goals and potential solutions (Franklin, 2015). This has been found effective in **Solution-focused Cognitive-Behavioral (SFCB)** coaching programs, which use this framework rather than pointing the focus on analyzing problems (Grant & Greene, 2001). There is growing support for the effectiveness of SFCB in personal and life coaching programs. Findings show that clients experience a decrease in negative affect and increase in positive affect while feeling facilitated towards successful goal attainment (Grant, 2006). Other studies validate the efficacy of SF coaching framework also within organizational and educational contexts (Grant, Curtaeyne, & Burton, 2009; Green, Grant, & Rynsaardt, 2007; Grant, Green, & Rynsaardt, 2010) and with people with intellectual disabilities (Roeden, Maaskant, & Curfs, 2014) as well as on line coaching (Poepsel, 2011) and sports coaching (Barlow & Banks, 2014).

PF approaches

PF analytic approaches have a long and established history in behavioral sciences, being Freud's psychoanalysis (1920) one of the earliest ones. The core assumption is that to create positive behavioral change one must gain insight into the nature of their cognitions (Ellis, 1962) and in order to solve a problem it is considered essential to identify and address its causal factors (Doggett, 2005). As such, PF approaches involve a complex analysis of the problem before addressing a truly comprehensive solution.

Comparative, although empirical, studies of **SF and PF approaches** (Grand, O'Connor, 2010) and other studies (Grant, 2012; Neipp, Beyerbach, Nuñez & Martinez-Gonzales, 2015) found that PF questions in comparison to SF questions significantly increase positive affect and decrease negative affect.

Approach vs. Avoidance goals

Individuals may be motivated by an approach goal, that is, one focused on pursuing a positive outcome or state, or by an avoidance goal, that is, one focused on avoiding a negative outcome or state (Elliot, Sheldon, & Church 1997). Avoidance goals have been found to evoke negative possibilities and to be less concrete in their focus (Heimpel, Elliot, & Wood, 2006) whereas approach goals tend to be more beneficial towards the goal striving process (Gillet, Lafreniere, Vallerand, Huart, & Fouquerau, 2014). Avoidance goals have been associated with depression and lower self-esteem while approach goals were associated with less depression (Coats, Jonoff-Bulman, & Alpert, 1996). In general, compared with approach goals, avoidance goals can generate negative effects and potentially impede goal-directed positive behavioral change.

Methodology

A sample of 140 undergraduate psychology students were randomly divided in small groups of up to six people for a single one-hour session during which they were initially asked to think about a real personal problem that they felt comfortable to share with the group. Before beginning the study the participants were quasi-randomly evenly allocated to one of the goal conditions: Approach or Avoidance each one containing separate groups of SF and PF questions. Participants allocated to the approach condition were instructed to set a goal that focused towards an outcome, event or action beneficial to solve the problem while participants allocated to the avoidance condition were instructed to move away from an outcome event or action which was negative, undesirable or detrimental in helping to solve the problem. They were then asked to respond to questions to measure the degree to which they were affected by the different approaches by using Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tallagen, 1988), a three-item self-efficacy measurement scale (Bandura, 1989), and another method to measure perceived goal progress (Linley, Nieleisen, Gillet & Biswas-Diener, 2010). At the end, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between dependent variables.

Key Findings

Hypothesis 1	Compared to PF questions, SF questions resulted in a significantly greater increase of positive affect
Hypothesis 2	There were no significant differences between the approach goal and avoidance goal on measures of positive affect regardless of the coaching questions condition
Hypothesis 3	There were no significant interactions between coaching questions and goal type for positive affect or perceived goal progress

Conclusions

- The results showed that SF questions have a more positive affect on self-efficacy and perceived goal progress and decrease negative affect compared to PF questions.
- PF questions did not result in any change over time, with the exception of a small increase in self-efficacy.
- No different effects were measured in SF questions compared to PF questions independently on what goal participants were assigned
- Many participants difficulties in purposefully setting avoidance goals indicate that, when it comes to engaging in thinking about change, people tend to think in terms of an approach goal

Limitation

- Rather than a whole coaching session, the study was designed to only emulate key parts of the coaching process
- The participants were students rather than "real clients"; an approach which may be subject to criticism
- Perceived goal progress was measured within the time constraints of the study which prevented any follow-up measurements
- Although the findings suggest that an approach or an avoidance goals have less impact on outcome than SF or PF approaches this may be due to the *complexity* of the goal rather to the type of goal; more research on this aspect may be required