

*‘Saying yes when you need to and no when you need to’: an interpretative phenomenological analysis on coaches’ well-being*

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# 'Saying yes when you need to and no when you need to' an interpretative phenomenological analysis on coaches' well-being

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## ABSTRACT

How coaches both experience and lead their own well-being has an important role to play in coaching; however, coaches' individual well-being has gained less attention in training, discourse, or research to date. This paper intends to amend this deficit and provides an understanding and conceptual model of the dynamics in a coach's individual well-being at work. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 18 coaches and the findings illustrate that Coaches' well-being is not a static state. There are job demands of coaching that can impact a coach's well-being and there is a need for coaches to balance their resources with a high level of agility. There are also deeper underlying dynamics to a coach's well-being that are interrelated with each other; energy currents, self-regulation, and levels of well-being. The way in which coaches optimise their resources and energy and active management of self will help or hinder a coach's well-being at work, which may be more difficult for novice coaches.

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## KEYWORDS

Coaching; well-being; energy; self-regulation; personal resources and job demands

## Practice implications

Individual coaches and other helping professionals may wish to reflect on the experience of the participants of this study by identifying (and sharing these in supervision) what

- well-being means to them individually and the value that it holds, so that there is greater clarity and priority given to individual well-being,
- physical, psychological or behavioural cues they may experience when their changes occur, so that the awareness of these grows, *and to*
- schedule and practise self-regulation activities regularly, so that energy can be kept in a cycle of constant renewal.

## Introduction

The nature of coaching itself demands a wide range of skills (Hodge, 2016), and a regular cycle of 'empathetic attachments, active involvements and felt separations' (Skovholt

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et al., 2001, p. 106). Coaches' work with clients forms complex and adaptive systems that are interdependent, dynamic, and constantly evolving (Passmore, 2015). Further to this, given the rising demands of the working environment clients' face now, it is also likely that coaches experience negative feelings when supporting clients, who are facing these demands (Schermuly & Bohnhardt, 2014). As a backdrop to this, coaches are often self-employed, work independently from others, and because of the high levels of confidentiality required, they can often find themselves alone when facing difficulties (Graßmann et al., 2018; Lancer et al., 2016; Passmore, 2015; Schermuly, 2014). Stepping beyond these demands, one of the core functions of being a coach is to be a proactive role model and demonstrate qualities that can be shared by others, for example, well-being (Lancer et al., 2016).

The importance of exploring and understanding coaches' individual well-being is clear; however, to the authors' knowledge there is little peer-reviewed research on this area. This paper seeks to elucidate the importance of the coaches' own individual well-being needs and how coaches perceive their individual well-being when working. Albeit there is some support for individual well-being as being an important consideration for coaches given the use of 'self and being' as fundamental instruments within coaching (Bachkirova, 2016; Lancer et al., 2016), the literature supporting this importance is scant. This paper, therefore, asserts that how coaches experience and lead their own well-being has an important role to play in coaching. However, it also highlights that coaches' individual well-being has gained less attention in training, discourse, and research to date (Brockbank & McGill, 2013). By placing a heavier focus on coaches' individual well-being, this paper and associated research seek to go some way towards amending this deficit.

### *Conceptualising well-being*

A person's individual well-being and self-management of well-being form complex and widely interpreted topics (Dodge et al., 2012; Haarhoff & Thwaites, 2015; Rupert & Dorociak, 2019). Well-being, purely from the perspective of its meaning, can also be complex and multi-faceted, making it difficult to define, measure and conceptualise (Dodge et al., 2012; Marks et al., 2006). Well-being is also influenced more broadly from the context of people's own individual interpretations. For example, how people evaluate their lives in the present and for longer terms (Seligman, 2011) will then influence how people then feel and function. It also embraces other facets such as a sense of meaning, authenticity, self-responsibility, and people realising their own individual strengths (Oades et al., 2017) that further enables well-being. Therefore, without acknowledging these broader perspectives well-being may only be partially understood.

Certain models provide frameworks on how well-being can be achieved, for example, the six dimensions of psychological well-being (Ryff & Singer, 2008) and the five components of well-being and flourishing (Seligman, 2011). However, Dodge et al.'s (2012) definition encapsulates the movement and dynamics of well-being and demonstrates how a lived experience of well-being may play out. They propose well-being as 'the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced' (Dodge et al., 2012, p. 230). Their conceptualisation is based on three underpinning principles:

- (1) Well-being has a set point that people return to,
- (2) Well-being has a level of predictability of a return to equilibrium/homeostasis when it comes to someone's well-being, and
- (3) There are fluctuating states between personal resources and challenges.

For this paper, we will build on the definition that Dodge et al.'s (2012) proposes and its underlining principles to create a deeper understanding of how well-being may interplay when people work in the coaching profession.

### *The dynamics of well-being in the context of work*

The demands of a person's job and the personal or job resources available to fulfil these demands are extant mechanisms that can impact an individual's well-being at work (Bakker et al., 2003; Crawford et al., 2010; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). The relationship between these two mechanisms can elicit a health impairment process (e.g., burnout) or, conversely a motivation process (e.g., commitment to work) (Bakker et al., 2003; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, 2007; Hakanen & Roodt, 2010; Schaufeli, 2017). Then, how a person responds to these processes will help or hinder their well-being even further (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, 2007; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). For example, if people have depleted vitality levels individuals use resources, such as energy or time (Hobfoll, 1989), and may even undermine their own functions at work (Bakker & Costa, 2014; Bakker & Wang, 2020). Conversely, if people experience motivational processes, they will proactively try to enhance the job demands and resources (Tims et al., 2012; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

There are known job demands associated with specific occupational roles or the nature of work people do that impact people's well-being. The jobs' strains of working in roles, such as psychologists, counsellors or social workers, have been associated with higher levels of risks of burnout (Lee et al., 2010; O'Connor, 2001; Shallcross, 2011; Skovholt et al., 2001). While there are some parallels to coaching to these roles, there is little to no literature available about the specific job demands of coaches. However, people who work in roles that motivate or coach the public can require a medium level of emotional labour to be expended (Needman et al., 2017; Steinberg, 1999). Working as a coach can create additional complexities as the coach is by and large the tool or main instrument of their work (Bachkirova, 2016; Barnett et al., 2007; Hardingham, 2004). This creates higher job demands since coaches are deemed the main 'job resource' and inherent risk for coaches draining their personal resources while they work (Schaufeli, 2017).

### *Maintaining equilibrium*

The ability to maintain a state of balance in well-being is significantly related to beliefs that a coach may hold on how much control they may, or may not have, over their work environment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Professional vitality (Skovholt et al., 2001) and other personal aspects that coaches bring to work, like time use, health capital or cognitive flexibility (Boniwell & Tunariu, 2019), also influence a coach's well-being levels at work. An abundance of these types of resources

has been identified as a predictor of higher levels of work engagement and well-being (Hakanen et al., 2006; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Furthermore, there is also a 'buffering' effect to having higher levels of personal resources such as these, as there is more strain needed before people's well-being is impacted (McEwen, 2008).

People strive to obtain, maintain, protect, and create resources that they value (Hobfoll, 1989); therefore, creating and holding a sense of personal value to well-being is foundational to people's well-being at work. There is also an element of proactivity that needs to be taken to help maintain resources such as professional vitality and conversely help mitigate the risks of work-related strains (Müller et al., 2020; Skovholt et al., 2001). These proactive behaviours are self-initiated and future-orientated actions that people at work do to make a change and improve themselves or their work contexts (Frese & Fay, 2001; Crant, 2000; Parker et al., 2006). Job crafting is an example of this and has shown to have a positive impact on well-being and job performance (Oprea et al., 2019; Rudolph et al., 2017), particularly when practised proactively (Rupert & Dorociak, 2019). Nevertheless, when job strain increases, individuals are less likely to use adaptive self-regulation strategies such as job crafting or other self-care strategies (Bakker & de Vries, 2020). Therefore, how coaches manage their own personal resources is considered a key component of coaches' individual well-being at work. Coaching supervision can act as buffer to job strain as it helps coaches to be resourced to manage their well-being levels (Hodge, 2016). However, little is known or discussed in the literature about how coaches manage their own well-being when working, hence the importance of this study contributes to bridging this gap.

## Method

Individual well-being is based upon an individual's interpretation of how they are feeling and involves individual responses and reactions to events that have happened to that person. The interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was considered the appropriate methodology as it shows respect and sensitivity of the research participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), which is an important environment to foster when people are talking about their well-being. IPA also allowed the ability to explore, with depth, the 'lived experience' of each participant and enabled an understanding of the phenomenological significance of this experience and how it impacts the participant individually (Smith et al., 2009).

## Sample

This study took a purposeful homogeneous (Smith et al., 2009) sampling strategy and focused on experienced coaches, holding a coaching accreditation with a coaching professional body (for example, International Coaching Federation (ICF) and/or the European Mentoring Coaching Council (EMCC)), and with a minimum five years' experience. In total, 18 participants were interviewed (see Table 1); their names were changed to preserve anonymity. The participants were recruited by expressions of interest on two web-based platforms. The researcher also approached their own coaching network and employed a 'snowball strategy' engaging the help of other participants.

**Table 1.** Sample table.

Participant	Main source of clients	Level/s of accreditation
Margie	External	ICF – PCC
Harlo	External	ICF – PCC
River	Internal	ICF – PCC
Linda	External	EMCC – Accredited Team Coach, AC – Accredited Master Coach
Ross	External	ICF – PCC, EMCC Master Practitioner
John	External	ICF – PCC
Janne	External	Not disclosed
Sarah	External	ICF – PCC
Wendy	External	EMCC – Senior Practitioner
Tasia	External	ICF – PCC
Annie	External	APECS – accredited coaching supervisor, accredited master executive coach
Andrea	External	ICF – PCC
Richard	External	Not disclosed
Christy	External	ICF – ACC
Kay	Internal	APECS – accredited coaching supervisor, accredited master executive coach
Rob	External	ICF – PCC
Nan	External	EMCC – Senior Practitioner
Bec	External	Not disclosed

### **Data collection**

The process of collecting data was via the use of semi-structured one-to-one interviews. This allowed for space and flexibility if unexpected issues arose that the researcher wanted to explore further (Oades et al., 2019). The interviews lasted on average 60 minutes and were audio-recorded. The interview guide was employed by the researcher, as a ‘guide’ only and included question like: Tell me where you feel your wellbeing is now? How would you describe your overall wellbeing when it comes to your coaching practice? And what have you noticed most about your own wellbeing, when you are coaching?

### **Data analysis**

The first author led the analysis according to IPA guidance described by Smith et al. (2009). The analysis was overseen by the second author who challenged interpretations, biases and pre-conceptions to ensure trustworthiness throughout the processes. The transcribed interview was read and re-read. Each interview was then coded in its entirety and through two cycles to condense coding further (87 codes were initially identified). A third and fourth categorising phase encapsulated the essence of the central meaning to one or two words. A similar process was then applied to these central meanings that enabled the researcher to generate subordinate themes and sub-themes that sat across the participants at a group level.

### **Ethical considerations**

This research is ethically compliant with the University of Reading Research Ethics Committee and was formally approved.

### **Findings**

This study interpretes that the coaches’ account of individual well-being relates to a coach optimising their resources and energy: ‘maintaining your energy levels, by having a diversity of things that you do’, which requires active management of self by the coach: ‘being



able to recognise when your energy levels or mood is changing and doing something about it (Richard)'. This dynamic that underpins a coach's well-being at work can be elaborated and understood more clearly by three interrelated themes: energy currents, levels of well-being and self-regulation, as represented in [Figure 1](#).

### **Energy currents**

Coaching requires coaches to have a 'way of being', for example, presenting their best self and holding the responsibility coaches feel for their clients. The coaches interviewed indicate that their own psychological energy is required during coaching sessions. They alluded to the dynamics of this energy in relation to their coaching practice. These ebbs and flows of energy add more complexity to the relationship between a coach's job demands and resources. Christy captured this dynamic when she mentioned that coaching can be 'quite tiring' and 'energising'.

Our interviewees often referred to an energy expenditure within this dynamic movement, as they are actively managing themselves when coaching to keep at a similar pace to their clients. The management of their psychological energy includes purposefully regulating their own emotions: 'on the edge of fear, because I've no idea what's going to happen' (Wendy) or holding their own levels of positivity or optimism, working 'really hard actually, as a coach to be more kind of black hatted' (John). Working with empathy, however, was the most frequently perceived as where most of the participants' psychological energy was utilised. Margie explained:

You know, we're here to be the best for our clients that we can be in service of them [...]. I think if you're giving yourself to your client, it's exhausting. It's exhausting.

These energy currents that seem to influence a coach's individual well-being at work, as working as a coach is: 'about maintaining our energy' (Richard). In this dynamic environment with ebbs and flows, coaches sometimes find it difficult to notice changes in energy: 'you know my energy is really down here, and I hadn't noticed it dropping' (Andrea).

### **Levels of well-being**

Most of the coaches in this current study rated their well-being levels as being relatively high. There were only a few participants that expressed lower levels to these, describing



**Figure 1.** The dynamics of a coaches individual well-being at work.

their current individual well-being as 'a struggle', 'sufficient' or 'slightly off centre'. Changes in 'well-being levels' were experienced differently for each coach, for example:

It's to do with a physical indicator in me that I am tired. (Andrea)

When my wellbeing is not so good, just more distracted I think. Less able to focus on the present. (Christy)

These individual cues or changes in well-being may also not always get the attention of individuals, and it may require coaches to use reflection in which gain a fuller awareness. For some, the cues were also more subtle for example: as being 'present enough', yet 'it's like a silent murmur, a real murmur that you don't pay attention to' (Tasia). It is also through coaches feeling that they had not made 'time or space' for them to emerge and or because you 'haven't dealt with it' or there is a build-up of 'residue' from coaching itself. It's impacts like these that create a potential snowball or downward spiral effect on a coach's well-being. For example:

You can go past that point without realising. Until that day when you realise, you know, you show up for a session and you're just not ready, or something gets in the way. (Andrea)

It can become destructive [...], you get in that kind of self-perpetuating circle of doom that you kind of can't come out. (Margie)

While most of the participants presented a picture that their well-being levels were high. They also highlighted that this theme has a bearing on the next interrelated theme of self-regulation. The examples of these include:

You have a day, and you have some coaching clients [...] my wellbeing doesn't get a look in actually. (Nan)

You know, slotted things very, very close together, you're in great danger of carrying over whatever happened to you in the last one, into the next one. (Ross)

This further reinforces that a coach's individual well-being is clearly a dynamic state. There also needs to be an acknowledgement that coaches need an awareness of their own unique individual cues for changes in well-being and how to respond to/recognise these early.

### **Self-regulation**

'Self-care' was a term that was frequently used during the interviews. It emerged from the analysis that self-regulation, e.g., how the coaches managed their work or their capacity for coaching, was the predominant strategy taken by coaches to manage their wellbeing on a day-to-day basis. For most of them, there appeared to be a strong sense of choice and autonomy over the use of time, which may be because most of the coaches who were interviewed were self-employed and could manage their own schedules.

Managing work that I've got the capacity or the headspace to be able to think ahead, to plan, to reflect. (Kay)

The approach to self-regulation, particularly the management of coaching limits and/or capacity, was different among coaches interviewed. This was also dependent upon a

coach's individual well-being levels also, which came up for some coaches, bringing the concept of capacity to include that of having a fitness for work perspective. Harlo explained:

So I've contacted the people who've been due to speak to me and just said, I'm not gonna be able to give you my best. I'm not in a good place. [...] And it took me a long time to do that.

Learning to self-regulate, however, is not something easy for some coaches, and it can potentially be something that may take a level of experience and/or confidence to do, as seen in the last excerpt and further reinforced by others, for example:

So it's, it's taken me a really long time to figure out and put in practice (Rob).

I haven't chastised myself about that I've done what I've needed to do to turn up at my desk and be productive. (Margie)

This, therefore, shows that there is a level of self-compassion required for coaches to practice self-regulation. 'I'm looking after myself, resourcing myself and being compassionate to myself' (Sarah). Coaches also reflected on other practices of self-regulation, which included implementing preparation times for coaching and what appeared to be less of a regular discipline to that of post sessions or recovery times after coaching.

## Discussion

The proposed conceptual model 'The Dynamics of a Coaches Individual Wellbeing at Work' is a key contribution emerging from the findings (see [Figure 1](#)). The authors propose that this model helps us to understand how well-being may interplay when people work as coaches and can be used as a frame of reference for; a coach's self-reflection of their own well-being, in coaching supervision, coach training, and as a basis for future research. This model also builds on the well-being definition proposed by Dodge et al. (2012) by reinforcing that the underlying principles of fluctuations, as demonstrated through this study that coaches' individual well-being is not a static state. This study also provides a deeper understanding of the dynamics to wellbeing, for example the role energy and self-regulation play in managing balances between resources and challenges faced. Further to this, there are job demands in coaching that can impact a coach's individual well-being (Crawford et al., 2010; Needman et al., 2017).

### *Individual well-being awareness*

The coaches in this current study generally reported higher levels of well-being; however, almost all the coaches also said occasions when they felt that their individual well-being had been at lower levels (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Schaufeli, 2017). Further to this, some cues occurred for most of the coaches, when changes (physical, psychological or social, etc.) in well-being levels were discussed. These individual cues, however, may be subtle, such as 'silent murmurs' or involve a gradual onset, such as 'paint splatters'. Therefore, it may not be until a coach is further into a downward spiral before changes in well-being are fully noticed, placing a coach in a more reactive stance for responding to these changes (Bakker & de Vries, 2020). This reinforces that coaches may need a different environment to gain a greater perspective on individual well-being levels and that there

are advantages of working with others to recognise any early changes in individual well-being. The roles of personal reflection and supervision are, therefore, important vehicles to support a coach's well-being. These mechanisms will help a coach see more clearly early changes in individual well-being and act as a checkpoint for a coach's well-being. It is, however, engaging with these activities proactively (Rupert & Dorociak, 2019) and regularly that will make the positive differences to coaches' individual well-being.

### *Protecting resources and energy*

Most coaches alluded to experiencing times where there have been some negative effects of coaching on their individual well-being. Key examples were heard through expectations of presenting your best self for clients and the need to hold and manage their personal and professional selves during coaching (Bachkirova, 2016; Schaufeli, 2017). It is these actions which require energy that is beyond that which is used inherently when working directly with a client, such as listening intensively. The importance of coaches to have more robust levels of individual well-being and engage in strategies to protect these levels can be seen as crucial influences of a coach' individual well-being. It is also the stepping into coaching and stepping out of coaching (re-centring themselves) that coaches do regularly in the day-to-day practices of coaching, where there may be ebbs and flows that a coach may experience in their energy (Skovholt et al., 2001). This interrelated theme of 'energy currents' is a core finding in this research and one that also creates the highest level of complexity to a coach's individual well-being at work. Here, it generates the strongest need for coaches to protect and optimise their personal resources of energy and ultimately where the important role of self-regulation unfolds: 'saying yes when you need to and no when you need to' (Nan).

Self-regulation and the utilisation of time and capacity management strategies (Oprea et al., 2019) offered the strongest evidence of 'day to day' self-care practices that coaches engage with. The high levels of autonomy that the coaches described allowed them to have control and choice over their workload. The confidence to say to 'no' was discussed by the coaches as being more easily voiced by coaches who are more experienced, and, therefore, for novice coaches, this may be a challenge. This is why coaching supervision is so important and demonstrates that proactive self-care behaviours may require a level of professional maturity and a level of assertiveness that takes time to learn or embed. This current study asserts self-regulation strategies as key to a coach's self-care, while recognising they may, however, in themselves consume a level of energy. Further to this, coaches need to be mindful to ensure that their personal resources and levels of well-being do not become heavily depleted. At these times when coaches' proactive behaviours may fall off and the focus becomes more on reactive self-management, not active management of self (Bakker & de Vries, 2020).

### *Implications for practice*

Based upon the findings of this research study, the following recommendations are made:

- For coaches to spend time reflecting on what well-being means to them individually and the value that it holds, and what physical, psychological or behavioural cues they may experience when their changes occur.

- For coaches to build time in their coaching schedules, so that the practice of self-regulation strategies, such as allowing sufficient breaks between sessions.
- For supervisors and peer supervision groups, to place more rigour on coaches' well-being.
- For trainers of coaching and coaching professional bodies to ensure that there is more emphasis on coaches' well-being.

### **Future research**

Expand this study quantitatively, so more coaches can be surveyed. This would allow us to gain a greater understanding of coaches' well-being. In addition to this, a longitudinal study would also be beneficial to observe the fluctuations that coaches have in the individual well-being levels.

### **Limitations**

This study explored the experience of individual coach's well-being at work. Only this environmental context has been considered during this study and other contexts may have had some bearing on the findings. Coaches were required to have a minimum of 5 years' experience, which may have limited the diversity of experiences in individual well-being across the participant group, particularly within the 'levels of wellbeing'. There may have been a difference between coaches who are new to coaching or had less experience in coaching. Only two coaches interviewed in this study were working as internal coaches, which could be a perspective that would be useful to have had a larger sample group of. Internal coaches may be at a higher risk for individual well-being issues, because they are also working for the organisation in which their clients are also working.

### **Conclusion**

We have looked at the well-being of coaches in their work and the important role this plays in coaching. Coaches are not without risk of having issues with their own well-being at work. It is the energy currents that are a core finding of this research and one in which reinforces that a coaches' well-being at work is an important part of coaching. It is also the use of self-regulation, recognised as job crafting, that is an important day-to-day self-care strategy in which coaches can mitigate the dynamic psychological energy costs associated with coaching. This proactive behaviour will provide coaches with a regular coping strategy and a preventative strategy against some of the negative effects that coaching may have on coaches. Further to the important self-care practices of supervision and reflection that a coach may already be engaging with. There also needs to be an acknowledgement that coaches need an awareness of their own unique individual cues for changes in well-being and how to recognise and respond to these early.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors



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