



## Conference Proceedings: Coaching Psychology in a Post-COVID World (IPCD Panel Discussion, October 8-9, 2021)

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**Abstract:** Coaches and coaching psychologists have been in a unique position to support the wellbeing of clients, teams, leaders and organisations through the challenges created by the pandemic. Based on a panel discussion at the International Psychology Conference Dubai (IPCD) 2021, hosted by Heriot-Watt University Dubai, it was argued that coaches have a role to play that extends beyond the present. Their work may also shape the future, contribute to the UN sustainable development goals and foster an environment of greater inclusion and equity. To do so, coaches also need to adapt, learn and change with continued learning about systemic and team coaching, leadership coaching in virtual and dispersed teams as well as coaching for wellbeing and positive psychology (PP). Coach wellbeing is key to this. By coaches ensuring they are at their best, with practitioner self-care, supervision sessions as well as coach support networks and peer-coaching groups, systemic transformation in wellbeing is more likely to take place. A new set of coaching skills and competencies may be called for, as well as ethics and industry frameworks to support it. The need for research in this field has never been greater to guide and inform these transitions.

**About the Panellists:** Silvia King (MA, MAPPCP, MBPsS; Positivity International) is a positive psychology coach based in the UAE and UK. Her interests include cultural aspects of positive psychology and coaching/coaching psychology. E-mail: [silvia@positivity-international.com](mailto:silvia@positivity-international.com)/  
[www.positivity-international.com](http://www.positivity-international.com). Dasha Grajfoner (PhD, CPsychol, Registered Coaching Psychologist (BPS)) is a Coaching Lab Director and Assistant Professor in Psychology at Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh. Clare Beckett-McInroy (EdD, ICF MCC & Registered Mentor Coach, EMCC MP & ESIA) is Founder of Beckett McInroy Consultancy and the #CoachME Coaching Model, including #TAP360 team level profiling tool. Guek-Nee Ke (PhD, CPsychol) is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Heriot-Watt University Malaysia and Coaching Lab. Lucy Bolton (MSc. Occupational Psychology) is Assistant Professor at Heriot-Watt Dubai.

**About the conference:** The International Psychology Conference Dubai (IPCD) was inspired by a grassroots movement amongst the regional psychology community in 2013. It was realized that while there is ongoing growth in the number of psychologists working in various sectors within the UAE, there were only a few professional development opportunities catering to the field. The picture was even less clear when looking at psychology practice in neighbouring countries. Something needed to be done to bring the psychology community together, promote best practice discussions, and provide



high-quality and focused learning opportunities. In 2021, the annual IPCD was held virtually on October 8 and 9<sup>th</sup>. For more, see <https://www.psych-me.com/>

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**The COVID pandemic has been a watershed moment** for the area of coaching and coaching psychology (CP), too. Coaching is a collaborative, systematic process that is solution-focused and result-oriented where the coach acts as a facilitator for the self-directed goal attainment of non-clinical clients (Grant, 2003); CP is the science behind (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008). Yet, while coaches, coaching psychologists and their clients, i.e., individuals, teams, leaders and entire organisations adapt to the “new ways of working”, the future of coaching is being shaped through practice and research in real time. Exploring what we have learned so far from the perspectives of CP experts from the Middle East, UK and Malaysia was at the heart of a panel discussion at the International Psychology Conference Dubai (IPCD) 2021, hosted virtually and supported by Heriot-Watt University Dubai. Moderated by Silvia King, the panellists brought together different regional and professional perspectives and included, Clare Beckett-McInroy, Dasha Grajfoner, Lucy Bolton, and Guek-Nee Ke.

### What we learned so far

The pandemic created a vast array of challenges (e.g., Kniffin et al., 2021; Okabe-Miyamoto & Lyubomirsky, 2021) which affected the various roles coaching can play during and after the pandemic (e.g., Jarosz, 2021; Panchal et al., 2020; van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2021). For example, mental health and wellbeing challenges brought positive psychology coaching (PPC) centre stage, especially coaching for wellbeing and resilience (e.g., Rashid & McGrath, 2020; van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2021; Waters et al., 2021). At the same time, new ways of working created several issues for organisations like leadership, team cohesion, coordination and culture (Kniffin et al., 2021). New problems like “Zoom fatigue” (Fosslien & West Duffy, 2020) and “health anxiety” (Trougakos et al., 2020) became part of coaching conversations, while working-from-home (WFH) effects differed given individual circumstances like personality, work or family context (e.g., Cornell et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Wei, 2020).

While some challenges were new, others were already evident. Coaching in virtual environments, for example, which extended the reach of many practitioners, accelerated an existing trend towards multicultural experiences of working in dispersed and remote teams, and increased the diversity of everyday interactions. From a regional perspective, it was suggested that practitioners in the UAE, with an almost 90% expat population, may have been better prepared for this shift, but the wider evidence base to leverage this experience is still very limited (e.g., Dodds & Grajfoner, 2018; King & van Nieuwerburgh, 2020). Similarly, systemic coaching (Whittington, 2012) and team coaching (Clutterbuck, 2018) were on the rise before the pandemic, yet their importance was heightened by the WFH challenges. Based on these and other early indications, several trends for the role of CP in a post-COVID world emerged that may affect not only research and practice, but wider industry challenges like ethics and competency frameworks and support networks for coaches to maintain learning and adaptation to change, as well as coach wellbeing.



### **Ethical challenges of coaching for wellbeing**

Workplace wellbeing and mental health were identified as an increasing topic of concern for organisations, managers and HR departments (e.g., CIPD, 2021), increasing the demand for coaching for wellbeing and resilience, the remit of PPC (Green & Palmer, 2019). Emerging WFH-related mental health and wellbeing challenges span the range from isolation and loneliness, the blurring of family-work boundaries, burnout, illness, a feeling of lacking control, states of languishing, redundancy and grief, among others. These topics are heavy with emotion, leading to intense coaching conversations; yet, they also open the door for more reflection, self-awareness and personal growth. While the negative wellbeing effects caught most of the attention, anecdotal evidence suggested that coaches also had positive coachee experiences to work with, like more flexible schedules, more time with family and the lack of commuting.

While the world adapts to a post-COVID setting, wellbeing and mental health are likely to remain central in coaching conversations, and applying appropriate tools or making referrals to qualified professionals will be key. Clare Beckett-McInroy highlighted the importance of contracting as a coaching core competency to effectively manage this aspect of the coaching relationship. Yet, as Dasha Grajfoner noted, “When we look at wellbeing and mental health, we are treading a fine line between clinical and non-clinical work”, considering that coaching is defined as intended for non-clinical populations. Panellists concurred that it raises ethical challenges for practitioners who need to assess in every encounter whether their skills and proficiency in coaching competencies are suited to the presenting client and topic. This would, however, put the onus not only on the practitioner but also industry associations, trainers and supervisors who support them.

Knowledge of ethics also becomes critical for organisations with the growing trend to provide managers with coaching skills to act as manager-coaches as the basis for “third generation” workplace coaching (Grant, 2017). While it may support the creation of high-quality connections, panellists cautioned that it may place managers in a position to make assessments or referrals regarding their employees’ wellbeing or mental health. Thus, organisations must consider safeguards for manager-coaches as well as their employees. This wider trend of fluid lines between clinical and non-clinical work and its ethical challenges may pose an opportunity for clinical psychologists who want to use coaching skills in their practice with clinical clients to broaden their repertoire.

### **What does your client need?**

Panellists reminded that, as a client-focused process, coaching should always be geared towards client need. This can be with respect to the type of coaching as well as the tools. Sometimes, giving space to voice things that cannot be shared elsewhere and sitting with difficult emotions can be the most valuable outcome. Clare Beckett-McInroy pointed to another coaching core competence in this context, namely coaching presence, which has become more important for coaches, based on her experience as coaching supervisor. At the same time, as the lines between “life” and “work” blur, so may the types of coaching that are required. Traditional distinctions like executive, life or career coaching may have become more fluid and coaches may find themselves needing to develop a wider repertoire; yet, this opens the door for practising beyond one’s competencies and/or comfort levels. Contracting would seem key to manage the relationship so that



a coach works ethically within their skills and competencies while at the same ensuring that the coachee's needs are met, either by this coach or referral to an alternative.

### **The systems perspective**

Blurred lines between work and life and the different types of coaching corresponded with another pre-pandemic trend, namely that of a systemic view in coaching, CP and PP. Seeing the coachee not only as an individual but as part of a connected world that influences the coachee's life and vice-versa may be an essential skill for post-COVID coaching. The systems perspective might be even more important in the Middle East region with a more collectivist society, where many family businesses overtly straddle work-life lines. Coaching in family businesses is a specific skill with evidence to support it (e.g., Shams & Lane, 2017) and a growing need for effective governance structures, with non-executives on boards to increase diversity of thought, as well as support for the next generation in terms of managing their wealth practically and psychologically. However, boundary management is crucial, given that family units can be challenging and conversations emotional. Once more, careful contracting and acute awareness of coach skills and competencies could be essential, as may be flexibility and experience of working with ultra-high net worth individuals.

### **The global contribution of coaching**

Post-COVID recovery is, however, not only an individual or national question, but a global one. Guek-Nee Ke pointed to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), with wellbeing implications for the Middle East (Lambert et al., 2020), suggesting the SDG agenda for 2030 could provide a blueprint for post-COVID recovery. She highlighted specifically SDG 3, including the promotion of wellbeing, which can be promoted by coaching and especially PPC. Embedding this wellbeing perspective in CP, coaching training and everyday practice could give coaches and coaching psychologists a global role in working towards achieving these goals. Coaching can also contribute to SDG 8, the promotion of sustainable inclusive and economic growth that includes productive employment and decent work for all, by bringing people (back) into the workforce, she argued, based on her work in Malaysia. The role of coaching could help female leaders, businesswomen and girls to flourish and prosper in professional careers outside of family, thus helping achieve SDG 5 and gender equality and empowerment for women and girls. Silvia King pointed to a potential wellbeing effect that coach awareness of this long-term, global perspective might have, by adding meaning to coaches' practice.

### **Team coaching and virtual**

Many companies already had dispersed teams prior to the pandemic or at least experience with colleagues or contractors who worked remotely. Yet, for most, virtual work was a new reality. Panellists noted particular challenges for organisations as a result of WFH, for example, during the on-boarding of new joiners, maintaining team cohesion or tackling employee wellbeing and loneliness. WFH was a new reality for some coaches and coaching psychologists as well, and the panel explored the implications for coaching skills and ethics. Practical knowledge on how to create trust in a one-to-one coaching relationship remotely and how to be present involves the same basic



skillset. Clare Beckett-McInroy pointed to the added complexity of team coaching and contracting, requiring an enhanced skillset compared to one-to-one coaching. Her biggest message for team coaches and leaders was to tap into what is shifting from the individual's perspective as well as at the team level. Guek-Nee Ke proposed a form of global team citizenship, characterised by tolerance, inclusion and sustainable community as a way forward for organisations. Team coaches could lend their support to establish these.

### **“The future is closer than you think”**

Panellists thought that if the exploration of CP themes of the last two years had shown anything, it was the need for coaches to be lifelong learners. Change is happening and “the future is closer than you think”, Clare Beckett-McInroy said. For this up-skilling, an evidence base is sorely needed. Evidence-based practice (Grant, 2016) is a key element in coaching where practitioners draw on their own knowledge from various disciplines, including their professional expertise as coaches and coaching psychologists. Guek-Nee Ke argued for the inclusion of research methods training to equip practitioners with the necessary skill to contribute their expertise to a growing evidence base that can inform such lifelong learning and upskilling. Dasha Grajfoner also urged more research into the coaching skills and professional competency frameworks that are required for post-COVID ways of working. Generally, closer collaboration between practitioners and researchers needed to be the way forward if the vast pool of practical expertise was to be tapped to inform lifelong learning, as well as lifelong researching.

### **Coach wellbeing**

Last but not least, panellists agreed that coaches and coaching psychologists should not only be coaching others for improved wellbeing and resilience but also practice self-care. In fact, it is part of ethical practice to ensure fitness to coach. Practitioners should not underestimate the toll a higher intensity of coaching sessions takes, paired with the need to learn and adapt to fast-changing environments. Having the support of a professional network, peer coaching and supervision were considered essential in this context. Diversity, equity inclusion and belonging also need to be part of practitioner experience for coach wellbeing.

### **Conclusion**

In a short span, the discussion covered a lot of ground from pre- to post-COVID aspects of coaching and CP challenges, as well as opportunities. A key insight seemed the need for practitioners to adapt, learn and change - either as a result of changes in their clients' environment or that of coaching practice. Important skills and methods for the post-COVID world are likely to be systemic and team coaching, leadership coaching in virtual and dispersed teams as well as coaching for wellbeing and PP. Coach wellbeing will likely be key to this, with practitioner self-care, supervision sessions as well as coach support networks and peer-coaching groups. A new set of coaching skills and competencies may be called for, including research skills and ethics and industry frameworks to support this. All this has implications for training and practice. The panel also identified opportunities for coaches and coaching psychologists to contribute to a post-COVID world, including for clinicians to add coaching to their skillset and for increased meaning of coaching work



when viewed from the perspective of the UN's SDGs. The need for CP research has never been greater to guide and inform those changes and transitions.

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