

# What is life coaching?

## An integrative review of the evidence-based literature

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### Abstract

Life coaching as an industry fully emerged in the 1990s and has exploded to become a \$2 billion global industry with nearly 50,000 certified life coaches (ICF, 2012). With the rapid growth and many different programmes and educational platforms, there is a need for defining the exact scope of what life coaching entails (Segers, Vloeberghs, Henderickx and Inceoglu, 2011). The purpose of this study was to conduct an integrative review of the evidence-based life coaching literature in order to develop a comprehensive objective characterisation of coaching that would capture the nature of the industry in the most concise manner and hopefully provide the objectives for establishing life coaching as a profession.

**Keywords:** life coaching; integrative literature review; behaviour change; quality of life

### Introduction

Life coaching is a relatively new cross-disciplinary industry that has been consistently gaining more attention, recognition, and criticism (Newnham-Kanas, Morrow and Irwin, 2010) and which fully emerged as an industry in the 1990's (Williams, 2003). According to a Global Coaching Study (International Coach Federation [ICF], 2012), there are nearly 16,000 life coaches in North America and nearly 50,000 life coaches worldwide. The industry generates annual revenue of \$707 million in North America and \$1.979 billion globally (ICF, 2012).

Life coaching has been recognised as a motivational and behavioural change approach that helps people to set and reach better goals, leading to enhanced well-being and personal functioning (Grant & O'Hara, 2006; Green, Oades and Grant, 2006; Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010). Life coaching is considered an innovative industry that has separated itself from a traditional therapeutic domain – a life coach takes on a role of a “thought partner” rather than an expert (Newnham-Kanas, Irwin and Morrow, D. 2011a), does not give advice and trusts that the clients are capable of generating their own solutions (ICF, 2015a). Life coaches do not perceive their clients as though they need to be “fixed” – instead, they focus on the future outcomes rather than past issues (ICF, 2015a). Practitioners suggest that life coaching is an efficient and powerful approach – that claim has also been supported by growing scientific evidence (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010).

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Traditional helping professions like psychology or counselling are carefully regulated (Williams & Davis, 2007). However, there are no rigorous regulations or such training requirements for life coaching, which has been recognised as one of the key issues facing the industry in the future (ICF, 2012). Another challenge is clients' confusion about differences and benefits between coaching and other industries such as mentoring or consulting (ICF, 2012). The definition of life coaching has also been the subject of much discussion (Williams & Davis, 2007). Multiple approaches are available and each of them provides different context for coaching. According to Grant (2003, p.254) for example:

“Life coaching can be broadly defined as a collaborative solution-focused, result-orientated and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of life experience and goal attainment in the personal and/or professional life of normal, non-clinical clients.”

Hudson (1999, p.6) describes a life coach as:

[A] person who facilitates experiential learning that results in future-oriented abilities. [A coach] refers to a person who is a trusted role model, adviser, wise person, friend, mensch, steward, or guide – a person who works with emerging human and organisational forces to tap new energy and purpose, to shape new vision and plans, and to generate desired results. A coach is someone trained in and devoted to guiding others into increased competence, commitment, and confidence.

ICF (2015a) defines life coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential.”

The existence of multiple approaches and lack of a single congruent approach creates confusion about the life coaching industry (Segers et al., 2011). With a growing interest in the practitioner world and scientific literature, it is therefore vital that a common understanding of the life coaching field is developed (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2011a). Lack of a strictly defined knowledge base and transparency may lead to lack of clarity in the industry and a decrease in the quality of services and studies (Segers et al., 2011). It is also important to understand the characteristics and nature of the coaching industry in order to further develop both the practice and academic aspects of it.

A number of empirical studies supporting the validity of life coaching are available (Newnham-Kanas, Gorczynski, Irwin and Morrow, 2009; Newnham-Kanas et al., 2011a). The majority of those studies, however, lack methodological rigor. Many empirical studies fail to provide an operational definition of a coaching technique used, which makes it difficult to deduce what the term “coaching” specifically refer to (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2009). Whilst multiple definitions and characterisations of life coaching are available – each definition may provide a different context for the study, implying a different life coaching process and following outcomes (Coach U, 2005; Ellis, 1998; Grant, 2003; Hargrove, 2008; Hudson, 1999; ICF, 2014; Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, Sandahl and Whitworth, 2011; Silsbee, 2010; Whitworth, Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2007; Williams & Davis, 2007). A unified characterisation of life coaching would allow the researchers to evaluate those changes in behaviour, life and wellness that can be exclusively attributed to life coaching. An objective definition or a unified characterisation of life coaching could potentially allow tracking behaviour changes directly associated with coaching, replicate the results in a similar setting and finally compare results across various studies.

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The purpose of this integrative review is to analyse the assumptions, parameters and results of various characterisations and models of life coaching available in the evidence-based literature, in order to better understand how they are presented and what their implications are for present and future research. The study aims at characterising life coaching in a manner that is concise, built on strict logical assumptions and free from redundant statements. Such characterisation of life coaching could contribute to future empirical and theoretical research, and the industry as a whole. Various aspects of life coaching are analysed in this study in order to compose a concise and pertinent characterisation, which could help to alleviate confusion amongst clients as well as coaches.

## **Methodology**

For purpose of this integrative review, multiple health- and behaviour-related databases, International Coach Federation (ICF) website, and Life University library resources were searched for the relevant articles, textbooks and information. The databases included: ScienceDirect, EBSCO, PubMed, Galileo and Scopus. Search terms for articles included: “life coaching”, “life coach”, “co-active life coaching” and “coaching model”. The following inclusion criteria were used for search parameters: the studies had to be published in English and pertain to life coaching in a non-corporate setting. Articles that did not discuss any elements relevant to life coaching or those that contained repetitive information already introduced in other articles were excluded. Textbooks were chosen according to their academic importance for Life Coaching courses taught at academic level. Empirical and theoretical sources were included, as suggested by Whittemore and Knafl (2005). Seventy six sources were used for the purpose of the research including: academic textbooks; journal articles; and educational pieces. A time period was not set as one of the parameters and the sources used were published or updated between 1957 and 2015.

First, the literature was analysed in search for common categories that could be used in the next stage of characterising life coaching. Data yielded by the search was diverse, complex, and each of the specified life coaching models, studies and educational pieces also had a different design. Data was analysed according to the integrative review of the literature methodology (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). Noting patterns and themes, noting dependence/co-dependence between variables, clustering, finding intervening factors and building a logical chain of evidence was used in order to establish what categories would help characterise life coaching for the use of this study. Important patterns emerged during this stage of critical analysis of data, with six general categories being identified in the analysed empirical and theoretical literature:

- 1) Definition of life coaching
- 2) Assumptions about the clients
- 3) Assumptions about the coaches (coaching skills)
- 4) Components of a successful coaching relationship.
- 5) Characteristics of the coaching process
- 6) Outcomes as a result of coaching.

Those categories have been used as generic categories to characterise life coaching and the literature was then grouped accordingly. Within each category, the literature was rigorously analysed according to integrative review techniques, deductive and inductive reasoning (Russell, 2005). Various methods of

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data analysis were used to conduct synthesis and eliminate redundant statements and assumptions in order to characterise life coaching in this study (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

For each of the 6 categories, related elements have been identified in the literature. Those elements were then grouped if any type of relationship was observed. Noting patterns and themes, noting dependence/co-dependence between elements, and clustering were used during data analysis to form characteristics of each of the 6 above listed categories. For example, the following elements of the definition of life coaching have been grouped together under a characteristic: “efficient relationship”; “a way of effectively empowering people”; “accelerates the process of great performance”; “future-oriented abilities”; and “people generating their own answers”. Although “future-oriented abilities” do not necessarily imply that the relationship will be efficient, the “efficient relationship” will have a component involving “future-oriented abilities”. The elements of data analysis employed in this study allowed the creation of the most general characteristics within each category and largely reduced data that was redundant.

This study uses a method of analysis that aims to synthesise past empirical and theoretical literature incorporating diverse methodologies. The objective was to capture the context and subjective elements (subjective due to literature search) of the topic. However, there are certain limitations to this study. There might be a potential systematic bias at any of the following stages – literature search, data analysis and extraction of findings. For example, not all of the important primary sources may have been found in the literature search stage. Data synthesis may also be inaccurate due to the many and various methodologies and sources included.

## Findings

The findings are discussed according to the six categories introduced in the Methods section. Table 1 below presents summary of findings.

<b><i>Definition of Life Coaching</i></b>	<i>Life coaching is a long-term efficient relationship that allows clients to maximise their potential</i>
<b><i>Assumptions about the Clients</i></b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Clients come from normal (i.e. non-clinical) populations</i></li> <li>2. <i>Clients are creative, resourceful and whole</i></li> <li>3. <i>Clients have the ability to change and grow</i></li> </ol>
<b><i>Assumptions about Coaches - Coaching Skills</i></b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Unconditional positive regard, no judgment and no assumptions</i></li> <li>2. <i>Active listening, focus is on the client</i></li> <li>3. <i>Challenging, empowering, acknowledgement and holding the client accountable</i></li> <li>4. <i>Dancing in the moment</i></li> </ol>
<b><i>Components of a Successful Coaching Relationship</i></b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Life coaching relationship promotes what is right in the client</i></li> <li>2. <i>Coaching relationship creates a safe and open environment</i></li> <li>3. <i>The coach and the client both equally design the relationship</i></li> <li>4. <i>Client-centred, individual approach</i></li> </ol>

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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. <i>The focus is whole life</i></li> <li>6. <i>Coaching is dynamic therefore change is always part of the relationship</i></li> </ol>
<b>Characteristics of the Coaching Process</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Coaching Process has an objective</i></li> <li>2. <i>Coaching Process is goal directed</i></li> <li>3. <i>Coaching Process is client-centred</i></li> <li>4. <i>Coaching Process is rooted in the present and future-oriented</i></li> </ol>
<b>Outcomes as a Result of Coaching</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Sense of self</i></li> <li>2. <i>Life of one's dreams</i></li> <li>3. <i>Behaviour/personality change</i></li> <li>4. <i>Improvement in wellness and quality of life</i></li> </ol>

**Table 1: Summary of findings**

### **Definition of Life Coaching**

Definitions of life coaching from the literature were assessed in order to choose or create one that is concise and free from redundant elements. All definitions were found to contain certain components. Some of those components were common for all approaches; others only appeared once or twice in the literature. The objective of this section was to assess which of those components were redundant and which were necessary and sufficient to construct a definition of life coaching. With the assessment of each component, the definition was refined to capture the very essence of life coaching. In that process the essential elements of life coaching used in every definition were analysed first. Then the definition was derived, which contains or implies all of those essential components. The following components – important phrases or descriptive terms – were extracted from the definitions and then grouped together if they were related:

- Partnership (ICF, 2014); relationship (Coach U, 2005; Kimsey-House et al., 2011; Silsbee, 2010; Whitworth et al., 2007; Williams & Davis, 2007);
- A way of effectively empowering people (Ellis, 1998; Hargrove, 2008; Whitworth et al., 2007); creative process (ICF, 2014); collaborative, solution-focused, results-oriented systematic process (Grant, 2003); powerful relationship (Kimsey-House et al., 2011; Whitworth et al., 2007; Williams & Davis, 2007);
- Accelerate the process of great performance (Coach U, 2005); catalysing relationship (Coach U, 2005); helping to learn (Whitmore, 2004);
- Provide clients with the tools, support and structure (CoachVille.com, 2003); inspiring, enabling clients (Hargrove, 2008); encouraging and supporting (Whitworth et al., 2007); search for the advantages of change (Hudson, 1999); creating multiple strategies (Williams & Davis, 2007); support, accountability and unconditional positive regard (Hudson, 1999);
- Clients maximise their potential (ICF, 2014); clients act boldly in the present (Hargrove, 2008); unlocking a person's potential (Whitmore, 2004); unlocking the client's own brilliance (Ellis, 1998); clients do more than they would have done on their own (CoachVille.com, 2003); clients set better goals (CoachVille.com, 2003); increased competence, commitment, and confidence (Hudson, 1999); people making important changes in their lives (Kimsey-House et al., 2011);

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Whitworth et al., 2007); development of effectiveness and self-generation (Silsbee, 2010); well-being, personal growth (Green, Grant and Rynsaardt, 2007) improve the quality of life (Ellis, 1998); involve ALL aspects of their lives (Williams & Davis, 2007);

- Identifying purpose (Coach U, 2005); new energy and purpose (Hudson, 1999); new vision and plans (Hudson, 1999); discover what clients want in life (Ellis, 1998);
- Future-oriented abilities (Hudson, 1999); emerging human (Hudson, 1999); live deeply in the future (Hargrove, 2008); design their future (Williams & Davis, 2007);
- Experiential learning (Hudson, 1999); enhancement of life experience (Grant, 2003); self-directed learning (Green et al., 2007);
- Long-term development (Silsbee, 2010); both short-term and long-term changes (Flaherty, 2005); long-term relationship (Williams & Davis, 2007);
- Normal (i.e. non-clinical) populations (Green et al., 2007);
- People generating their own answers (Ellis, 1998); not looking outside of themselves for solutions (Ellis, 1998); invent something new (Ellis, 1998); clients think something they've never thought before; clients say something they've never said before (Ellis, 1998); people discover their own solutions (Williams & Davis, 2007).

The next step of the analysis was to determine whether these components could be generalised given that some type of relationship was observed. This allowed avoiding repetitions and redundant statements when developing the definition. Again, noting patterns, noting dependence/co-dependence between elements, inclusions, and clustering were used during data analysis. The objective of this process was to obtain the most general components of the definition that could not be further generalised.

For example, “efficient relationship” captures the following phrases and descriptive terms listed above: “a way of effectively empowering people”, “provide clients with the tools, support and structure”, “accelerates the process of great performance”, “identifying purpose”, “future-oriented abilities”, “people generating their own answers”. Although – as mentioned above – “future-oriented abilities” do not necessarily imply that the relationship will be efficient, the “efficient relationship” will have a component involving “future-oriented abilities”.

Since efficiency is a measurable concept (determined by the ratio of output to input), the author suggests that “efficient relationship” can be analysed in terms of “input” and “output” of a coaching relationship. It is the author’s understanding, that clients can achieve the highest output when they have a clearly identified life purpose (output to achieve), are provided with the right tools and support system (strategies to achieve the output) and – while living deep in the moment – are oriented towards the future (not the past). The way life coaching can accelerate the process of great performance minimises the time needed to achieve the desired outcome, which is another aspect of its efficiency. Clients focus better and produce results more quickly. Creating multiple strategies to achieve what clients want in their lives significantly increases the probability of success. And finally, clients generate their own answers and discover their own solutions – clients *know* what the *right* choice is although many times they do not acknowledge it *at the time*. This assumption assures that for clients every solution comes from *within*, and every action and strategy is executed from the *inside out*, not the other way round. Strategies initiated by internal motivation are sustainable in the long run and have higher probability of success (Schneider et al., 2011).

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Similarly “maximise the client’s potential” captures the following: “clients act boldly in the present”, “unlocking a person’s potential”, “unlocking the client’s own brilliance“, “clients do more than they would have done on their own”, “clients set better goals”, “increased competence, commitment, and confidence”, “people making important changes in their lives”, “development of effectiveness and self-generation”, “well-being, personal growth”, “improve the quality of life”, “involve ALL aspects of their lives”, “experiential learning”, “enhancement of life experience”, “self-directed learning”. Coaching inspires people to experiment, to use their creativity, resourcefulness and brilliance. Coaching increases competence, commitment, and confidence. People are empowered to make important changes in their lives. Coaching facilitates self-generation, well-being and personal growth in *all* aspects of people’s lives.

Green et al. (2007) included “normal (i.e. non-clinical) populations” in their definition of life coaching. This study also recognizes that life coaching does not seek to treat issues related to mental health. This component has been assigned as an assumption on clients and therefore excluded from the definition *per se*. Assumptions about the clients clearly describe who will and who will not enter and remain in a coaching relationship. Alternative approach would be to include mental health of clients in the definition.

It is also the author’s understanding that any coaching process needs time. In order to establish a professional coaching relationship, a coaching agreement between the coach and the client and observable coaching results need to be present (ICF, 2015b). Therefore, in the definition provided below, life coaching exceeds mere use of coaching skills and requires a certain amount of time for the relationship to be established.

The following components have been recognized as essential for the definition of life coaching:

- Relationship: the type of connection between the coach and the client.
- Efficient: the relationship and the coaching process guarantee the highest output (client’s performance) to input (coach’s effort, time, other resources) ratio.
- Maximise the client’s potential: in the coaching relationship, clients attain their highest potential given their natural constraints: higher than they could have achieved on their own.
- Long-term: the time period needed for the established relationship to be efficient. Coaching is a process, and as every other process it hardly ever brings about substantial instantaneous changes – it requires a longer time period for a significant shift to take place.

Then the following definition can be assigned:

*Life coaching is a long-term efficient relationship that allows clients to maximise their potential.*

The same process of data analysis has been applied to each of the remaining categories: assumptions about the clients, assumptions about coaches, components of a successful coaching relationship, characteristics of the coaching process, and outcomes as a result of coaching. Noting patterns and themes, noting dependence/co-dependence between elements, and clustering were used during data analysis to form characteristics of each of the remaining categories.

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### ***Assumptions about the Clients***

The literature provides examples of various attributes that clients should be endowed with in order to be able to create a successful coaching relationship. A similar process to the one we used to derive the definition in the previous section has been applied in order to group the attributes and derive the minimum number of assumption sufficient to imply all of those attributes. Three broad assumptions have been identified in the literature, which – if satisfied – guarantee that the clients are functioning optimally in a coaching relationship and are able to deal with the challenges associated with all steps required in a coaching process. Implications of each assumption have also been discussed in terms of clients' attributes, actions, and their consequences.

#### *1. Clients come from normal (i.e. non-clinical) populations*

Grant (2003) found that coaching involves making purposeful change by clients from normal, non-clinical populations. According to Grant (2006) and Ladegård (2011) coaching methodologies are directed at, and effective for, non-clinical populations. The coaching clients need to come from non-clinical populations in order to fully understand the meaning of “maximizing potential” (as stated in the proposed definition of life coaching) and to be able to perform it. It is an inherent characteristic of every client and has therefore been left out from the definition of coaching itself.

Williams and David (2007) argue that coaching clients should be mentally capable and possess a sense of life purpose. They suggest that people make conscious choices and that they want what they say they want. Clients coming from non-clinical populations possess a healthy personality, which allows them to constantly seek to grow psychologically, and is the reason why they want to achieve more and why they strive to increase their human potential (Williams & Davis, 2007). This assumption indicates that coaching clients fully understand the meaning of maximizing potential in a coaching relationship and are able to perform it. Moreover, as Francis and Milner (2006) point out, clients understand the meaning of optimal wellness, which indicates that they intentionally make and try to follow choices that support a healthy lifestyle and enhance the quality of their life.

Clients who come from non-clinical populations and have a healthy personality tend to create a clear sense of identity and purpose. Consequently, according to Owler (2012), they set more realistic goals, are more motivated to achieve them and are generally more satisfied once they are reached. Clients then become more in control of the coach-client relationship and can take full responsibility for establishing the agenda of each session (Kimsey-House et al., 2011; Pearson, Irwin and Morrow, 2013; Whitworth et al., 2007). Newnham-Kanas, Irwin, Morrow and Battram (2011b) argue that clients can also be held accountable for their decisions, because as coming from non-clinical populations, they are able to follow the action plan.

#### *2. Clients are creative, resourceful and whole*

Newnham-Kanas et al. (2010) state that since life coaching is a humanistic, client-centred approach, the client is perceived as full of potential and possibilities. Clients either already possess the needed skills and resources, or they have the ability to develop skills that are needed (Nixon-Witt, 2008; Whitworth et al., 2007). According to Whitworth et al. (2007), the assumption that the client is whole has certain implications for the coaching process – it means that the client is not broken, does not need fixing, and does not need advice. Williams and Davis support that statement by stating that the emphasis in life

coaching is on studying the whole person, not fragmented parts. The fundamental principle in coaching says that nothing is wrong with the client. Clients are considered creative, resourceful and whole. They are considered to be the experts in their lives (Irwin & Morrow, 2005; Kimsey-House et al., 2011; Pearson et al., 2013; Whitworth et al., 2007; Zandvoort, Irwin, and Morrow, 2009). Newnham-Kanas et al. (2010) suggest that a successful coaching relationship is based on belief that clients have all the answers to their own life questions, they know what is best for them and are capable of finding the answers themselves. For any given problem the clients are facing in their lives, they can generate a long list of great solutions (Ellis, 1998).

### *3. Clients have the ability to change and grow*

It has been suggested that coaching is often associated with personal change in coaching clients (Zeus & Skiffington, 2000). Coaching is specifically designed to create change by creating new learning opportunities for the client (Whitworth et al., 2007; Starr, 2003; Rogers, 2008). According to Kegan and Lahey (2009) an individual's ability to adapt changes how this particular individual knows what to do. That knowledge results in the individual's growth in order to achieve the desired change (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). When facing difficulties, clients can deepen their learning and commit to a specific behavioural change (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2011b). According to Williams and Davis (2007) this ability creates the potential to grow, which becomes even stronger within the life coaching relationship. The assumption on clients' ability to grow comes from the observation that people seek value, they always have a choice and they grow from connection. Because people contribute, they are instinctively looking for the contribution of others and are attracted to those interactions that provide them with value and opportunity. Every situation gives multiple opportunities and creates multiple choices. When clients realize it, they gain access to more resources and potential outcomes, which allows them to choose a more optimal outcome as a result (Kimsey-House et al., 2011).

#### ***Assumptions about Coaches – Coaching Skills***

The objective of life coaching is to assist people with developing the confidence and skills necessary to implement changes and maintain those changes, thus creating a shift. Based on the assumption that clients have all the answers, coaches do not provide their clients with answers. According to Zandvoort et al. (2009) they apply their skills through numerous strategies and techniques to help their clients find out what they want and what actions need to be taken to achieve it. There are certain responsibilities associated with the coaching process. Life coaches should be equipped with the right skills in order to be able to engage in a successful coaching relationship. Those skills have been discussed below.

#### *1. Unconditional positive regard, no judgment and no assumptions*

Connection in a coaching relationship allows both the coach and the client to enter a powerful conversation. In order to create that connection, the coach needs to come from a place of unconditional positive regard and unconditional acceptance (Rogers, 1961). According to Rogers (1967) unconditional positive regard provided by the coach creates a non-judgmental environment. In such an environment, it is easier for the clients to face their worries and concerns. Ellis (1998) suggests that "life coaches coach from a blank canvas", which means that they enter the coaching relationship without any judgments or assumptions about the process or the specific outcomes. Schneider et al. (2011) points out that lack of judgment or assumptions implies that the coach respects the client's beliefs, needs and goals. The fact that the coach can accept the clients the way that they are helps the clients accept themselves (Brady, 2011).

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## *2. Active listening, focus is on the client*

According to Rogers and Farson (1957) active listening is an important and most effective way to bring about personality changes in people. Active listening can positively impact clients' attitudes toward themselves and others and their perceptions – they become more open to new experiences, more emotionally mature, and less defensive (Rogers & Farson, 1957). Active listening is a powerful skill that comes from the place of genuine curiosity (Rogers & Farson, 1957). Life coaches are great listeners on all levels, which involve trusting their intuition and full awareness of the client's emotions, body language, and the environment (Irwin & Morrow, 2005; Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010). Active listening requires that the coach is focused on the client – the coach needs to be present and available just for the client (Coach U, 2005). As Schneider et al. (2011) suggest, the coach has to be therefore present in every moment, devoting full attention to the client, listening to the content as well as what has not been said, listening to understand. Part of active listening is clarifying and reflecting what has been said to deepen the understanding (Williams & Davis, 2007). More than that, according to Rogers and Farson (1957), the client must be convinced that the coach is seeing things from his perspective. When the coach is actively listening, clients tend to listen to themselves as well, which helps them become clear on their own thoughts, feelings and potential contributions (Rogers & Farson, 1957).

## *3. Challenging, empowering, acknowledgement and holding the clients accountable*

Life coaches facilitate powerful processes by acknowledging who and where the clients are in every moment, challenging them with where they can be and helping them to reach where they want to be, empowering them on the way there and holding them accountable for their choices and achievements (Irwin & Morrow, 2005; Newnham-Kanas, Irwin and Morrow, 2008; Pearson et al., 2013). Acknowledging is a very important part of life coaching in which the client's achievements are recognised and emphasised. Coach U (2005) suggests that by focusing on the client's strength, this step is an expression of approval and support. Challenging helps the client to set attainable yet high goals and standards. Empowering, on the other hand, facilitates the client's progress and learning along the way. While setting goals together with clients, the coaches remove the barriers and hold their vision. While helping the clients achieve those goals, the coaches support new learning and self-discovery (Coach U, 2005). There is a difference between empowering and advising (ICF, 2011; Kimsey-House et al., 2011; Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010; Whitworth et al., 2007). The coach does not give advice, but rather asks powerful questions to bring in new perspectives, analyse available resources, explore alternatives and create more choices and opportunities (Ellis, 1998; Newnham-Kanas et al., 2008; Nixon-Witt, 2008; Schneider, Hashizume, Heak., Maetani, Ozaki and Watanabe, 2011). Holding the clients accountable reminds them of where they are versus where they committed to be.

## *4. Dancing in the moment*

As suggested by Whitworth et al. (2007) and Pearson et al. (2013) dancing in the moment is another skill required in life coaching. As we discuss in the next section, a life coaching relationship is dynamic. According to Schneider et al. (2011) life coach must therefore be ready and able to respond to constant changes in the client's goals, needs, actions, beliefs, expectations, experiences or perspectives. Nixon-Witt (2008) states that the specific approach in life coaching is always tailored to the client's individual needs. Every individual situation calls for a quick response and an adjustment (Schneider et al., 2011). Dancing in the moment refers to that flexibility and willingness of the coach to go in the client's direction

respecting the client's pace, process, and response time (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010; Schneider et al., 2011). As Kimsey-House et al. (2011) point out, in this dynamic relationship, every response from a client reveals a new piece of information. A coach needs to update the choices and react accordingly every time, so adjustment is an integral component of life coaching dynamics.

### ***Components of a Successful Coaching Relationship***

The uniqueness of life coaching lies in the fact that it concentrates on wellness and health rather than pathology; it promotes what is right rather than what went wrong. That approach allows the coaching relationship to be efficient in the sense that the clients reach their highest possible outcomes given a certain input during each coaching session and in between sessions. There are six components, which – when present – guarantee a successful coaching relationship.

#### ***1. Life coaching relationship promotes what is right in the client***

The key to understanding life coaching is realising that it starts with what is right in the client and promotes the client's strengths, uses them as a foundation to expand and build on. Martin et al. (2012) suggest that the higher purpose of life coaching is not to heal or repair what has been broken. One of the assumptions made about the clients is that the clients are whole and healthy; they are not broken nor are they sick. Martin et al. (2012) also claim that the goal of life coaching is to nurture what is best in people. When people feel empowered having discovered what it is that they want and can do, the quality of their lives improve (Williams, 2003). This improvement cannot be achieved when the clients focus on what is wrong and what cannot be done or achieved. At the same time, as Williams and Davis (2007) point out, the clients are granted “unconditional positive regard”.

#### ***2. Coaching relationship creates a safe and open environment***

Optimal environment for life coaching is open and safe (Kimsey-House et al., 2011; Whitworth et al., 2007; Williams & Davis, 2007). According to Williams and Davis (2007), a safe environment is the one where truth can always be told. Such an environment has no judgment, and creates a huge space for growth (Whitworth et al., 2007). The clients need to feel safe, only then are they able to take the risks that need to be taken in order for them to achieve the optimal outcomes (Whitworth et al., 2007). As Newnham-Kanas et al. (2010) point out, the relationship between the coach and the client is strengthened by respect, openness, empathy and authenticity of both the coach and the client. A safe and open environment promotes curiosity, boosts creativity and enhances motivation.

#### ***3. The coach and the client both equally design the relationship***

It is important that both the coach and the client take responsibility for defining and designing the desired coaching relationship (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010). Whitworth et al. (2007) argue that the coach and the client have different roles, but they are equally important for the coaching relationship. Both the client and the coach become partners and equally empower their relationship. In return, the coaching relationship becomes empowering for the clients, allowing them to take charge of their lives, their choices and helping them to achieve what they want (Coach U, 2005; Kimsey-House et al., 2011).

#### ***4. Client-centred, individual approach***

According to Whitworth et al. (2007), every client is unique with a unique set of needs, values, circumstances, goals, skills, interests and habits. That is why in life-coaching the relationship is client-

centred and the approach is very personal and tailored to the client's individual needs, values and circumstances (Kimsey-House et al., 2011; Pearson et al., 2013; Whitworth et al., 2007). Life coaches hold space intentionally reserved just for the clients – working one on one brings more details to the clients' attention, helps them gain greater focus and may ultimately help them to create more possibilities and make better choices (Francis & Milner, 2006; Williams & Davis, 2007). As suggested by Whitworth et al. (2007) – the agenda should therefore come from the client. The most personal, individual approach there can be, is the one that is internal for the client – not externally proposed by the coach. Schneider et al. (2011) claim that client empowerment is based on the premise that people are more inclined to change their behaviour when the motivation is internal rather than external. When given the right support clients create solutions to their own problems without advice (Ellis, 1998). The clients therefore select their agenda; have full control over the discussed topics and goals (Kimsey-House et al., 2011; Schneider et al., 2011; Whitworth et al., 2007).

##### *5. The focus is whole life*

Life coaching relationship seeks to develop the client in all areas and influence every part of their being (Coach U, 2005). That is why in life coaching the emphasis is on the whole person and the client's whole life, not just fragmented pieces (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010; Williams & Davis, 2007). Life coach and the client analyse various areas of the client's life to assess the level of satisfaction in each area and overall balance in life (Williams & Davis, 2007). A few examples of those aspects include: mind; heart; career; health; environment; finances; business; family; relationship; fun; intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth (Coach U, 2005; Whitworth et al., 2007; Williams & Davis, 2007).

##### *6. Coaching is dynamic therefore change is always part of the relationship*

The last component of the optimal life coaching relationship is its dynamics. Every day our situation, circumstances, expectations and goals change. It is therefore important to incorporate this dynamic as a natural component of the coaching relationship. Although this may seem simplistic, the author wants to emphasise that the coaching relationship is not static. With change occurring constantly over time, client's circumstances may change from session to session and the coaching relationship will dynamically adapt as well. In a dynamic setup, change becomes an inherent component of a coaching relationship. According to Whitworth et al. (2007), the clients' goals will change over time because clients discover more about themselves and clarify their priorities. Because people are naturally inquisitive, clients learn and develop all the time – change and growth happens naturally in every moment. What was important yesterday does not have to be necessarily a goal for today. Coach U (2005) suggest that as the coach and the client work together, the intentional development that incorporates the natural dynamics offered by the coaching relationship creates sustainable growth.

Life coaching offers a relationship, where there is no judgment, where the coach and the client only focus on what is right and what can be done, where the clients feel safe and can freely express themselves, it creates an optimal environment for new ideas, creating countless choices and limitless possibilities (Whitworth et al., 2007; Williams & Davis, 2007). Ellis (1998) argues that in such an environment and when the coach and the client both equally design the relationship, the clients no longer focus on their fears and limitations and are truly able to realise their full potential, feel empowered and fully contribute to the relationship. When the approach is individual, the focus is the client's whole life and the ultimate goal is to create balance in the client's life, change will always be part of the coaching

relationship. By appreciating the dynamic nature of coaching, both the coach and the client are able to create a deeper, more meaningful alliance and better quality of choices for the client. According to Whitworth et al. (2007), those choices and specific goals help the client to reach a higher level of performance, learning, growth and ultimately fulfilment. By dramatically increasing their feasible choices, the clients are able to make the best choice for themselves and reach the most optimal outcome in every situation.

### ***Characteristics of the Coaching Process***

Previous sections discussed the necessary elements to create an efficient life coaching relationship and that efficient coaching relationships result in an efficient coaching process. An efficient coaching process is the one that utilises all available resources, considers all available perspectives and leads to the highest available outcome at a lowest cost. The lowest cost in life coaching can be understood as the least amount of time and the easiest possible way to achieve a certain goal, whilst staying aligned with the values and visions of the client (Coach U, 2005). Ellis (1998) suggests that through the efficient coaching process, clients can move from problems to solutions and completely new outcomes. That is why in this section we examine the efficient process undergoing the coaching relationship and the characteristics of that process required to maximise the client's potential.

#### *1. Coaching process has an objective*

The literature suggests that a coaching process has an objective. There are many philosophical views on life coaching stated in the evidence-based literature, and the objective(s) vary. According to Newnham-Kanas et al. (2010) and Kimsey-House et al. (2011), life coaching is based on three principles, which work as the objectives for maximizing the client's potential and facilitate the change. Those principles are fulfilment, balance and life process (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010; Whitworth et al., 2007). Fulfilment implies that the clients are "living a life that is valued and alive" while fully expressing who they are; balance is "fundamental to the quality of life" as it is focused on moving forward, action and harmonious flow; and life process emphasises the quality of the present, "where clients are now" and "what is happening in the moment" (Whitworth et al., 2007). Creating the most fulfilling life implies creating life that has a meaning and purpose that is true to the client's values and satisfying (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010). Achieving balance requires opening up clients' perspectives on various areas of their lives and turning their new available choices into action (Irwin & Morrow, 2005; Newnham-Kanas et al., 2011b). Following the principle of life process in coaching allows the client's internal emotional experience and what is happening in the present moment in time to be addressed (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010). Those three principles push the clients to attain their highest potential and create a life that is more fulfilling; more balanced, and reflects a more successful life process (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010).

Another objective of the coaching process proposed in the evidence-based literature is learning (Griffiths & Campbell, 2009). According to Lawton-Smith and Cox (2007), client development is very important in the coaching process. The aim of coaching is to optimise the learning conditions, minimise resistance to learning and allow the client to progress (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Wang & Millward, 2014). Facilitation of learning and results has also been proposed by the ICF (2015c) as being inherent to the coaching process. Improvement of (personal and professional) performance is another example of an objective of the coaching process (Whitmore, 2004; Stewart et al., 2008). Clients may also present with various individual objectives and expectations for the coaching process (Lawton-Smith & Cox, 2007).

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## *2. Coaching process is goal directed*

The coaching process is goal directed in a sense that each client sets a goal, identifies possible obstacles, creates a plan of action, identifies support for achieving their goals, takes action, monitors the outcome and evaluates (Grant, 2003; Schneider et al., 2011). Grant (2003) argues that the actions are then updated according to that evaluation in order to reach the goals in a better and more productive way. Goal setting has been shown to be an empowering tool used to evoke sustainable behaviour changes (Locke & Latham, 1984; Locke & Latham, 1990; Pearson et al., 2013). Having meaningful goals and progression towards their achievement are directly correlated with increased well-being (Green et al., 2006). All goals are set according to the three principles – fulfilment, balance and life process. The focus of life coaching process is mostly on moving clients forward and achieving the desired results (Nixon-Witt, 2008). Through a goal directed process the clients learn how to take full responsibility for creating the life that they want (Francis & Milner, 2006).

## *3. Coaching process is client-centred*

One of the assumptions about the life coaching relationship was that it is client-centred. This assumption extends onto the on-going coaching process as well. As Williams and Davis (2007) point out, in that approach the client is perceived as full of potential and possibility. One of the objectives of an efficient coaching process is to explore what is and is not important to the client and to find out his or her values and life purpose (Irwin & Morrow, 2005). According to Grant (2003), the coaching process concentrates on all main domains of experience: behaviour, thoughts, feelings and environment, while intending to strengthen all aspects of the client's life – fulfilment, health, family, career, transitions, life balance, financial, community, spiritual, hobbies, and well-being (Coach U, 2005; Francis & Milner, 2006; Kimsey-House et al., 2011; Whitworth et al., 2007; Williams & Davis, 2007). The coaching process is dynamic and involves constant shifts between what is most important for the client in the moment (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010). The highly flexible and accommodating nature of the coaching process deepens the client's learning and allows him or her to achieve their goals in the most efficient way (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010; Pearson et al., 2013; Whitworth et al., 2007).

## *4. Coaching process is rooted in the present and future-oriented*

Life coaching recognises the time variable and how it shapes the individuals' perceptions, experiences, and quality of their actions (Boniwell, 2005; Boniwell, Osin, Linley and Ivanchenko, 2010; Boniwell, Osin and Sircova, 2014; Coach U, 2005). A past-, present- or a future orientation will result in different set of perceptions, experiences and actions and consequently lead to distinct outcomes. Therefore a life coaching process is rooted in the present – the clients learn to be present in their life and to become more aware of their everyday experience (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2010). At the same time, life coaching is based on the belief that individuals are able to create their future through visioning and conscious, purposeful living (Williams & Davis, 2007). It is the individual life purpose that clearly defines the clients' future, goals, actions and strategies that take them there.

Orientation of the coaching process towards goal achievement and the future implies that coaching process becomes solution-oriented. During the coaching process, the client's unproductive negative thoughts are being challenged, which allows the client to set higher goals, focus on alternative perspectives and create various solutions to his or her problems leading him or her to achieving those

higher goals (Green et al., 2006; Newnham-Kanas et al., 2011b). In that sense the life coaching process emphasises client strengths and the importance of the solution rather than analysis of the problem (Grant, 2003); in this way the life coaching process becomes solution-oriented as well.

### ***Outcomes as a Result of Coaching***

Life coaching can be associated with numerous benefits in many different aspects of the client's life. It allows clients to discover their life purpose, their dreams, who they truly are and want to be. Oowler (2012) argues that a stronger and clearer sense of self inspires positive changes to occur. Clients feel empowered and supported by the coaching relationship and no longer see their problems as unsolvable and tasks as hard. Through life coaching clients become less engaged and gain perspective and insight, which allows them to attain goals more successfully. Whilst clients create the lives of their dreams, they become more fulfilled and happy. When clients experience more love, happiness, health, and wealth, they benefit their closest environment – they have better relationships, contribute more to their community, have better work-related outcomes, and better mental and physical health (Ellis, 1998; Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). Some of the outcomes and benefits of the life coaching process supported by the scientific literature have been grouped into four broad categories: sense of self; life of one's dreams; behaviour/personality change; quality of life. There is an emerging body of empirical research into life coaching, which suggests various benefits for the coaching clients. The outcomes are discussed below and a more detailed summary is presented in Tables 2a-c.

#### *1. Sense of self*

Clients gain a clearer sense of who they are, which is manifested by: improved self-awareness, self-discovery (ICF, 1998), and a larger vision (Ellis, 1998). Life coaching also helps clients to discover their life purpose (Creed & Blume, 2013).

#### *2. Life of one's dreams*

According to Ellis (1998), clients learn the efficient way to achieve their goals and create the lives of their dreams. Through the life coaching process, clients acquire a variety of tools and practice how to apply them in real life. This process gives the following benefits: smarter goal setting, enhanced communication skills, project completion (ICF, 1998), increase in goal striving (Green et al., 2006), successful self-regulation (Green et al., 2006), efficient goal attainment (Grant, 2003), effective approach to creating a positive change (Grant, 2003), efficient problem solving (Ellis, 1998) and the feeling of empowerment and support (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2011c).

#### *3. Behaviour/personality change*

Martin et al. (2012) suggest that traits that are perceived by the client as problematic can be unambiguously identified and changed, the client benefits from that change. Life coaching inspires behaviour and personality change. The clients can gain more self-confidence (ICF, 1998), enhanced self-acceptance (Zandvoort et al., 2009), psychological courage and self-determination (Curtis & Kelly, 2013). Clients can change their behaviour (Lisspers, Hofman-Bang, Nordlander, Rydén, Sundin, Ohman and Nygren, 1999), stop a bad habit or change their career (ICF, 1998). Levels of the clients' self-reflection decrease and levels of insight increase (Grant, 2003), and they tend to make themselves a priority (Zandvoort et al., 2009).

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#### 4. Improvement in wellness and quality of life

According to Francis and Milner (2006) and ICF (1998) life coaching helps clients to make permanent changes that lead to improved health, wellness and quality of life. Clients become capable of creating a more balanced life at a lower stress level (ICF, 1998). They often choose a healthier lifestyle; have more energy and notice fitness improvement (ICF, 1998; Zandvoort et al., 2009). As a result of the life coaching process, clients have more fun, more income, more free time; they build better relationships with their co-workers and function better in their families (ICF, 1998). Life coaching promotes an appreciation of life on a deep level and inspires changes in all domains leading to subjective well-being, psychological well-being, and hope (Ellis, 1998; Green et al., 2006).

<b><i>Sense of self</i></b>	finding life purpose improved self-awareness self-discovery larger vision	Creed and Blume (2013) ICF (1998) ICF (1998) Ellis (1998)
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**Table 2a: Outcomes as a result of coaching – sense of self and life of one’s dreams.**

<b><i>Behaviour/ personality change</i></b>	hardiness self-efficacy more hope  self-esteem more self-confidence stop a bad habit career change enhanced self-acceptance psychological courage self-determination better emotional regulation behaviour change decrease in self-reflection client becomes a priority changing problematic personality traits better time management	Gardiner and Kearns (2012); Green et al. (2007) Gordon-Bar (2014) Green et al. (2006); Green et al. (2007); Worgan (2013) Brady (2011); Pearson et al. (2012) ICF (1998) ICF (1998) ICF (1998) Zandvoort et al. (2009) Curtis and Kelly (2013) Curtis and Kelly (2013) Curtis and Kelly (2013) Lisspers et al. (1999) Grant (2003) Zandvoort et al. (2009) Martin et al. (2012)  Boniwell and Sircova (2014)
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**Table 2b: Outcomes as a result of coaching – behaviour/personality change.**

<p><b><i>Improvement in wellness and quality of life</i></b></p>	<p>improved wellness and quality of life</p> <p>improved health</p> <p>more balanced life</p> <p>lower stress level</p> <p>fitness improvement</p> <p>more fun, more income, more free time, they build better relationships with their co-workers and function better in their families</p> <p>appreciation of life on a deep level</p> <p>decreased depression and anxiety</p> <p>improved mental health</p> <p>overcoming fears</p>	<p>Easton van Laar (2013); Frisch (2013); Gordon-Bar (2014); Leach, Green and Grant (2011); Newnham-Kanas et al. (2008); Newnham-Kanas, Morrow and Irwin (2011c); Pearson et al. (2012); Schneider et al. (2011); Shearsmith (2011); Spence and Grant (2007); Whitley (2013); Worgan (2013); Zandvoort et al. (2009)</p> <p>Ammentorp, Uhrenfeldt, Angel, Ehrensward, Carlsen and Kofoed (2013); Francis and Milner (2006); ICF (1998) ICF (1998)</p> <p>Grant (2003); ICF (1998)</p> <p>Zandvoort et al. (2009)</p> <p>ICF (1998)</p> <p>Ellis (1998)</p> <p>Frisch (2013); Grant (2003)</p> <p>Gardiner and Kearns (2012); Grant (2003)</p> <p>Brady, (2011); Hanssmann (2014)</p>
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***Table 2c: Outcomes as a result of coaching – improvement in wellness and quality of life.***

## Conclusion

This study characterises life coaching based on findings from the evidence-based literature. The thorough analysis of the literature allowed for the creation of a definition that would be consistent with the available knowledge base/evidence. First, the essence of life coaching was determined and then the obtained characteristics were summarised to obtain the following definition: “Life coaching is a long-term efficient relationship that allows clients to maximise their potential.”

As the literature provides examples of various attributes that clients should be endowed with in order to be able to create a successful coaching relationship, the next step was to find assumptions about clients, which – if satisfied – guarantee that the client is functioning optimally in a coaching relationship. The assumptions are as follows: clients are healthy and come from normal (i.e. non-clinical) populations; clients are creative, resourceful and whole; clients have the ability to change and grow.

There are certain responsibilities associated with the coaching process. Life coaches should also be equipped with the right skills. Based on the assumption that coaching clients have all the answers, coaches apply their skills through numerous strategies and techniques to help their clients to find out what they want and how to achieve it. The desired skills outlined in the scientific literature are: unconditional positive regard, no judgment and no assumptions; active listening, focus is on the client; challenging, empowering, acknowledgement and holding the clients accountable; dancing in the moment.

The uniqueness of life coaching lies in the fact that it concentrates on wellness and health. That approach allows the coaching relationship to be efficient in the sense that the clients reach their highest possible outcomes given a certain input during each coaching session and in between sessions. The following components are required in order to create a successful coaching relationship: the life coaching relationship promotes what is right in the client; the coaching relationship creates a safe and open environment; the coach and the client both equally design the relationship; a client-centred, individual approach; the focus is whole life; coaching is dynamic, therefore change is always part of the relationship. An efficient coaching relationship results in an efficient coaching process, which utilises all available resources, considers all available perspectives and leads to the highest available outcome at the lowest cost. The characteristics of that process required to maximise the client’s potential are: the coaching process has an objective; the coaching process is goal directed; the coaching process is client-centred; and the coaching process is rooted in the present and future-oriented.

And finally, life coaching can be associated with numerous benefits in many different aspects of the person’s life – it allows clients to discover their life purpose, their dreams and who they truly are and want to be. While they create the lives of their dreams, they become more fulfilled and happy. The life coaching process can lead to: a stronger sense of self; the life of one’s dreams; behaviour change; and better quality of life.

This contribution has direct relevance for coaches across all fields who are interested in how the coaching practice and industry are presented in the evidence-based literature. Available literature helps coaching practitioners understand the foundation of life coaching – its definition, assumptions about the clients, coaching skills, components of the coaching relationship, characteristics of the coaching process

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and the outcomes. An important implication for coaching practice is that – according to results described in the evidence-based literature – life coaching provides strong support for coachees to make the necessary changes in their lives and achieve various desirable outcomes.

This study was an attempt to unify existing notions of life coaching to establish a common knowledge base. Any further practical application of this characterisation in research studies will continue to strengthen the field rather than to split it into numerous ‘approaches’. As life coaching is a new vastly growing field, it is to its advantage to have a single approach, a general and objective ‘operational definition’, one that is easily referred to and one that is derived from the existing evidence-based literature. A unified characterisation of life coaching would allow the researchers to evaluate those changes in behaviour, life and wellness that can be exclusively attributed to life coaching. Future research in this area is warranted to deepen our understanding of life coaching. It is of vital importance for future empirical research, as a common knowledge base will allow comparisons across various studies without loss of generality and could serve the further growth of life coaching.

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