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EVIDENCE-BASED COACHING TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS: A SYSTEMATIC OVERVIEW

Abstract: *coaching psychology has emerged as a rigorous scientific discipline that applies psychological theory and methods to support goal attainment, performance enhancement, and personal development. This paper provides a systematic overview of the principal techniques and tools employed in evidence-based coaching practice, examining their theoretical foundations, empirical support, and practical applications across diverse professional domains – business, healthcare, education, and sport. Drawing on peer-reviewed literature and international coaching standards, the study analyses four major technique clusters: goal-focused approaches (the GROW model), solution-focused coaching, cognitive-behavioural coaching, and positive psychology-based interventions. Core practical tools – powerful questioning, the Wheel of Life, values clarification, and mindfulness-based practices – are examined with respect to their application in leader development, organisational consulting, and individual coaching. The analysis reveals that the effectiveness of coaching techniques depends not on their isolated use but on their skilful integration within a coherent, client-centred coaching relationship. The paper concludes that advancing the evidence base of coaching psychology requires longitudinal outcome research, greater methodological rigour, and sustained integration of neuroscientific findings into coaching practice.*

Keywords: *coaching psychology, coaching techniques, evidence-based coaching, GROW model, solution-focused coaching, cognitive-behavioural coaching, positive psychology, coaching tools.*

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ДОКАЗАТЕЛЬНЫЕ ТЕХНИКИ И ИНСТРУМЕНТЫ КОУЧИНГА: СИСТЕМАТИЧЕСКИЙ ОБЗОР

Аннотация: *психология коучинга сформировалась как самостоятельная научная дисциплина, применяющая теорию и методы психологии для поддержки достижения целей, повышения эффективности и личностного развития клиентов. В статье представлен систематический обзор четырёх основных кластеров техник коучинга (целевой подход, модель GROW; коучинг, ориентированный на решение; когнитивно-поведенческий коучинг; позитивная психология), а также ключевых практических инструментов. Сделан вывод, что результативность коучинговых техник определяется их умелой интеграцией в рамках целостных коучинговых отношений. Итогом работы являются рекомендации по развитию доказательной базы психологии коучинга как прикладной научной дисциплины.*

Ключевые слова: *психология коучинга, техники коучинга, доказательный коучинг, модель GROW, коучинг ориентированный на решение, когнитивно-поведенческий коучинг, позитивная психология, инструменты коучинга.*

Introduction.

Coaching psychology, defined as the systematic application of psychological theory and evidence to the enhancement of goal attainment, well-being, and performance in personal and professional life, has undergone substantial development over the past two decades [3]. As the discipline matures, increasing attention has been directed toward the rigorisation of its methodological foundations – in particular, the identification, evaluation, and systematic application of techniques and tools whose effectiveness is supported by empirical evidence.

The demand for evidence-based coaching is driven by both scientific and practical imperatives. From a scientific perspective, coaching psychology seeks recognition as a legitimate applied discipline, and this recognition requires a coherent body of research demonstrating that its core techniques produce measurable, reproducible outcomes [8]. From a practical standpoint, organisations, healthcare systems, educational institutions, and sporting bodies increasingly invest in professional coaching. According to the ICF Global Coaching Study, global coaching revenue reached approximately \$2.849 billion USD in 2019, with around 71,000 professional coach practitioners active worldwide – a 33% increase on the 2015 estimate [7].

Notwithstanding considerable growth in coaching research, a significant gap persists between the proliferation of coaching tools in practice and the rigour of their empirical validation [3]. Many techniques originating in therapeutic and organisational psychology have been adapted for coaching contexts without systematic evaluation of their effectiveness under coaching-specific conditions. This paper addresses this gap by synthesising the available evidence on the principal coaching techniques and tools, examining their theoretical bases, and mapping their practical applications across key professional domains.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Coaching Techniques.

The diversity of coaching techniques reflects the pluralistic theoretical heritage of coaching psychology. The discipline draws on cognitive-behavioural psychology, positive psychology, humanistic and person-centred psychology, adult learning theory, and systems thinking, among other frameworks [3]. This theoretical plurality is both a

source of richness and a source of complexity: it enables practitioners to select approaches calibrated to client needs, yet it also generates ongoing debate about which theoretical orientations most reliably produce positive outcomes.

A foundational distinction in coaching technique typology is between directive and non-directive approaches. Directive techniques – such as psychoeducation, skill instruction, and structured feedback – position the coach as a domain expert who imparts knowledge or provides guidance. Non-directive approaches – exemplified by Socratic questioning, reflective listening, and open-space exploration – position the coach as a facilitator who supports the client's own insight and decision-making. The Handbook of Coaching Psychology documents that neither pole of this continuum is universally superior; the appropriate balance depends on client goals, developmental stage, and the specific challenge being addressed [8].

Athanasopoulou and Dopson's systematic review of executive coaching outcomes identifies three intersecting dimensions along which coaching approaches vary: the profile of the coach, the framework or agenda employed, and the modality of delivery. Their analysis demonstrates that social and organisational context exerts significant moderating effects on coaching outcomes, such that the same technique may produce markedly different results depending on the relational, structural, and cultural environment in which it is deployed [1]. This finding has important implications for technique selection: practitioners must assess contextual factors as carefully as they assess client characteristics.

A further organising dimension is the level of analysis at which a technique operates: individual cognitive and behavioural processes, interpersonal and relational dynamics, or systemic and organisational forces. Hawkins and Turner argue that contemporary coaching increasingly requires a systemic perspective – one that attends not only to the individual client but to the wider relational and organisational ecosystem, including the people the client leads, colleagues, customers, and the broader community [6]. Systemic coaching techniques therefore extend beyond the dyadic coach-client relationship to encompass the client's impact on all key stakeholders.

2. Core Evidence-Based Coaching Techniques.

2.1 The GROW Model.

The GROW model (Goals, Reality, Options, Will/Way Forward) remains the most widely used structured framework in coaching worldwide [9]. Its enduring popularity reflects several practical advantages: it provides a clear conversational scaffold that coaches and clients can navigate together, it is applicable across diverse coaching contexts, and its stage-by-stage structure makes it amenable to systematic evaluation.

The model's efficacy appears to derive primarily from its emphasis on goal specificity. Drawing on decades of goal-setting research, Grant argues that goal clarity and the coach's goal-focused skills are among the strongest predictors of successful coaching outcomes: clients who articulate clear, challenging, and personally meaningful goals show markedly greater progress than those who engage in coaching without explicit goal-setting [4]. The GROW model operationalises these principles through its opening phase, in which coach and client collaboratively define a specific, well-formed goal before exploring current reality or generating options.

A limitation of the GROW model, acknowledged in recent scholarship, is its predominantly linear structure, which may insufficiently accommodate the non-linear, recursive nature of real-world goal pursuit. Practitioners report that goals frequently evolve during coaching as clients gain new awareness, encounter unforeseen obstacles, or revise their values and priorities. Passmore and Sinclair therefore recommend treating the GROW framework as a flexible conversation guide rather than a rigid procedural protocol, with the coach moving fluidly between stages as the coaching conversation demands [9].

2.2 Solution-Focused Coaching.

Solution-focused coaching (SFC) draws on the solution-focused brief therapy tradition, adapting its core principles to coaching contexts. Central techniques include the miracle question (inviting clients to imagine an ideal future in which their current difficulty is resolved), scaling questions (prompting clients to assess their position on a progress continuum), and exception-finding questions (directing attention to circumstances in which the problem is absent or less severe) [3].

The theoretical rationale for SFC rests on a competence-based rather than deficit-based model of human functioning: rather than analysing what is wrong and why, solution-focused coaches direct client attention toward existing strengths, resources, and past successes. Cox, Bachkirova, and Clutterbuck note that this orientation makes SFC particularly well-suited to time-limited coaching contexts and to clients who are forward-focused and motivated to change [3]. The approach is documented across a range of applications in the Handbook of Coaching Psychology, including performance coaching, leadership development, and healthcare settings [8]. Its focus on client agency and competence aligns closely with the person-centred values that underpin coaching psychology's ethical framework.

2.3 Cognitive-Behavioural Coaching.

Cognitive-behavioural coaching (CBC) applies the core principles of cognitive-behavioural therapy to non-clinical coaching populations, targeting dysfunctional thinking patterns, limiting beliefs, and unhelpful behavioural habits that impede client goal attainment [8]. Key CBC techniques include cognitive restructuring (identifying and challenging unhelpful automatic thoughts), behavioural activation (designing graduated action steps toward desired outcomes), and stress inoculation training (developing coping skills for anticipated challenges).

Palmer and Whybrow provide extensive documentation of CBC's application across a range of coaching contexts, including performance coaching, career coaching, and leadership development [8]. The approach is particularly appropriate for clients whose progress is impeded by anxiety, perfectionism, procrastination, or imposter syndrome – psychological patterns prevalent in high-performance professional environments. A critical success factor in CBC is the accurate identification of the cognitive or behavioural pattern maintaining the client's difficulty; skilled CBC coaches therefore invest substantial time in the assessment phase before introducing change techniques.

2.4 Positive Psychology Coaching.

Positive psychology coaching (PPC) integrates findings from positive psychology – the scientific study of optimal human functioning – into coaching practice [5]. Core PPC techniques include strengths identification and application (using validated

instruments such as the VIA Character Strengths Survey), savoring and gratitude practices, hope theory interventions (building agency and pathway thinking toward goals), and post-traumatic growth exploration.

Green and Palmer bring together extensive evidence demonstrating that PPC enhances subjective well-being, engagement, meaning, and flourishing across diverse coaching populations [5]. A neuroscientific foundation for these outcomes is provided by Boyatzis and Jack's brain-imaging research, which distinguishes between two fundamental coaching modalities: coaching with compassion (oriented toward the client's ideal self and positive vision) and coaching for compliance (oriented toward problems and performance gaps). Their fMRI study demonstrates that compassion-oriented coaching activates the default mode network – associated with big-picture thinking, motivation, social connection, and parasympathetic modulation – whereas compliance-oriented coaching activates the task positive network, linked to stress and avoidance motivation [2]. These findings suggest that positively-framed coaching approaches create neurological conditions more conducive to sustained, motivated change.

3. Core Coaching Tools and Their Application.

3.1 Powerful Questions.

The practice of powerful questioning is arguably the most fundamental tool in the coaching practitioner's repertoire. Distinguished from information-gathering questions by their capacity to provoke reflection, challenge assumptions, and generate new perspectives, powerful questions are typically open-ended, future-oriented, and designed to expand rather than narrow the client's field of awareness [3]. Passmore and Sinclair identify questioning as a core competency across all major professional coaching frameworks, including the updated ICF Core Competencies, emphasizing that the quality of questioning directly shapes the depth of client reflection and the scope of options explored [9].

Effective coaching questions share several characteristics:

- they are brief and precise;
- they address one issue at a time;
- they carry no embedded assumptions or judgements;

– they are asked with genuine curiosity rather than rhetorical intent [9].

Categories of powerful coaching questions include scaling questions (assessing current state and desired trajectory), presuppositional questions (assuming positive change and inviting clients to elaborate its features), systemic questions (exploring the relational and contextual dimensions of the client's situation), and reflexive questions (inviting the client to consider alternative perspectives on their own thinking and behaviour). The Complete Handbook of Coaching documents multiple applications of these question types across theoretical traditions, from cognitive-behavioural through to narrative and systemic approaches [3].

3.2 The Wheel of Life.

The Wheel of Life is a widely used diagnostic and goal-setting tool that invites clients to visually map their current level of satisfaction across key life domains – typically including career, finances, health, relationships, personal development, recreation, physical environment, and purpose/meaning [9]. By rating satisfaction in each domain and plotting the results on a circular diagram, clients generate an immediate, holistic picture of balance and imbalance in their current life, which serves as a powerful starting point for goal-setting and priority clarification.

The primary value of the Wheel of Life lies in its capacity to make implicit dissatisfactions explicit, to contextualise presenting goals within the broader pattern of the client's life, and to surface interdependencies among different life domains that the client may not previously have recognised. Passmore and Sinclair describe it as a practical tool for establishing baseline awareness at the outset of a coaching engagement, enabling coach and client to identify priority areas and set a meaningful agenda for subsequent sessions [9].

3.3 Values Clarification Tools.

Values clarification – the process of identifying, prioritising, and articulating one's core personal values – is a foundational coaching intervention across diverse theoretical orientations. Tools for values work include card sorting exercises (in which clients rank value cards to identify priorities), values mapping (linking values to current and

desired behaviours), and values journaling (reflective writing to explore the lived meaning of core values).

Green and Palmer emphasise that alignment between coaching goals and the client's core personal values is a critical determinant of intrinsic motivation and sustained behaviour change [5]. When clients pursue goals that are congruent with their values, they demonstrate greater persistence, higher tolerance of setbacks, and more durable post-coaching change than when goals are externally imposed or disconnected from personal meaning. Values clarification tools are therefore particularly important in career, life, and leadership coaching contexts, where clients frequently face decisions between competing priorities that cannot be resolved by rational analysis alone.

3.4 Mindfulness-Based Coaching Techniques.

Mindfulness-based techniques, derived from the contemplative tradition and validated in clinical contexts, are increasingly integrated into coaching practice as tools for enhancing self-awareness, emotional regulation, and cognitive flexibility [8]. Key practices include formal mindfulness meditation (systematic attention training through breath awareness and body scan), mindful listening (the coach's cultivation of full, non-reactive presence in the coaching conversation), and mindful goal pursuit (moment-by-moment awareness of one's action and motivation in pursuing goals).

The neuroscientific rationale for mindfulness in coaching is supported by Boyatzis and Jack's research on the neural correlates of coaching approaches. Their fMRI study demonstrates that approaches which activate the default mode network – fostering openness, present-moment awareness, and positive emotional engagement – create the neurological conditions most conducive to creative problem-solving, perspective-taking, and the deep reflection that characterises transformative coaching conversations [2]. Mindfulness practices can be understood as a deliberate means of supporting clients in accessing and sustaining this neurological state during and between coaching sessions.

4. Applications Across Professional Domains.

The techniques and tools reviewed above find application across a broad spectrum of professional coaching contexts. Table 1 presents a summary mapping of the principal coaching techniques and tools to their primary application domains, indicating the nature of the evidence base available for each application.

Table 1

Coaching Techniques and Tools: Application Domains and Evidence Base

Technique / Tool	Primary Application Domains	Key Benefits	Evidence Level
GROW Model	Executive and leadership coaching, performance coaching, sport psychology	Goal clarity; structured action planning	Substantial (goal-setting research; practitioner studies) [4; 9]
Solution-Focused Coaching	Business, healthcare, education, brief coaching contexts	Strengths activation; forward focus; resilience	Moderate-High (qualitative; case studies) [3; 8]
Cognitive-Behavioural Coaching	Performance, career, leadership, stress management coaching	Belief restructuring; self-regulation; resilience	High (documented across multiple contexts) [8]
Positive Psychology Coaching	Leadership, education, healthcare, well-being coaching	Well-being; meaning; engagement; flourishing	Moderate-High [5]
Powerful Questions	Universal – all coaching domains	Reflection; perspective shift; expanded awareness	Documented across frameworks [3; 9]
Wheel of Life	Life, career, and executive coaching	Holistic self-assessment; priority clarification	Widely used; practitioner consensus [9]
Values Clarification	Life, career, leadership, transition coaching	Intrinsic motivation; authentic goal alignment	Linked to motivation and well-being research [5]
Mindfulness-Based Techniques	Leadership, healthcare, sport, stress management	Self-awareness; emotional regulation; presence	Neuroscientific support [2]; clinical research [8]

Compiled by the author based on [2; 3; 5; 8; 9].

In leadership and executive coaching, goal-focused, cognitive-behavioural, and positive psychology techniques are most extensively deployed. The ICF Global Coaching Study (2020) reports that business coaching – encompassing leadership, executive, and organisational specialisations – accounts for 65% of coach practitioners' main specialty, with leadership coaching rising from 25% in 2015 to 30% in 2019 as the most frequently cited single specialisation [7]. The same study indicates that 52% of coaching clients are managers (27%) or executives (25%), underscoring the centrality of leadership contexts to professional coaching practice.

In healthcare settings, coaching techniques are increasingly deployed to support patient behaviour change in chronic disease management, to develop clinician leadership capabilities, and to address professional well-being and burnout prevention. Solution-focused and positive psychology techniques are particularly well-suited to healthcare coaching contexts because of their orientation toward client strengths and resources, which is especially important when clients face challenging or irreversible health conditions [5]. Mindfulness-based techniques are documented in the Handbook of Coaching Psychology as particularly relevant to stress management and resilience-building among healthcare professionals [8].

In educational contexts, coaching supports teacher professional development, student academic performance and well-being, and school leadership effectiveness. Green and Palmer identify strengths-based and well-being-oriented coaching tools – including values clarification, hope theory interventions, and positive emotion cultivation – as relevant to educational coaching contexts [5]. In sport, coaching psychology draws on goal-setting techniques, cognitive restructuring, mindfulness-based performance enhancement, and imagery practices to optimise athletic performance and support post-injury recovery. Hawkins and Turner note that in complex organisational and sporting environments, systemic coaching that attends to the athlete's impact on teams and stakeholders produces outcomes that purely individual-focused approaches cannot achieve [6].

Conclusion.

This paper has examined the principal evidence-based techniques and tools in coaching psychology, tracing their theoretical foundations and empirical support. Several integrative conclusions emerge from the analysis.

First, no single coaching technique or tool is universally optimal. The systematic review by Athanasopoulou and Dopson demonstrates that coaching outcomes are shaped by the intersection of the coach's profile, the framework employed, and the social and organisational context in which coaching takes place [1]. Skilled practitioners must therefore assess client characteristics, contextual factors, and goal specificity simultaneously, drawing on a broad methodological repertoire. Cox, Bachkirova, and Clutterbuck describe this capacity for responsive, integrative practice as one of the defining competencies of an experienced coaching practitioner [3].

Second, the coach-client relationship functions as a foundational moderating variable. Regardless of the specific technique employed, coaching outcomes are consistently linked to the quality of the relational context in which techniques are deployed. Passmore and Sinclair identify trust, empathy, and authentic presence as core relational competencies that underpin all effective coaching, independently of the theoretical approach used [9]. This finding has important implications for coach training: developing relational and self-awareness competencies is at least as important as mastering specific methods.

Third, the evidence base for coaching techniques, while growing, remains uneven. Cognitive-behavioural coaching and goal-focused approaches are well-documented across multiple professional contexts [4; 8]. Solution-focused and positive psychology approaches are increasingly supported by qualitative and outcome research [3; 5]. Systemic and mindfulness-based techniques are grounded in neuroscientific and clinical evidence but require further coaching-specific outcome research [2; 6]. A priority for coaching psychology research is therefore the development of longitudinal, mixed-methods studies that track the durability of technique-specific outcomes across diverse client populations.

Fourth, neuroscientific research is providing increasingly compelling mechanistic explanations for why certain coaching approaches are more effective than others. Boyatzis and Jack's brain-imaging research demonstrates that compassion-focused coaching – directed toward the client's ideal self and positive vision – activates neural networks associated with motivation, openness, and sustained engagement with change, in contrast to compliance-focused coaching, which activates networks linked to stress and avoidance [2]. This evidence provides a principled basis for design choices in coaching technique integration and points toward future research in neurobiologically-informed coaching protocol development.

In conclusion, the field of coaching psychology possesses a rich and expanding repertoire of evidence-based techniques and tools capable of producing meaningful improvements in human performance, well-being, and development across diverse professional contexts. Sustaining and deepening the scientific foundation of this repertoire – through rigorous longitudinal research, critical reflexivity, and genuine integration of psychological theory and neuroscience with coaching practice – remains the central challenge and opportunity for the discipline as it enters its next phase of development.

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