

Academic Paper

# 'It's kind of revolutionary' - An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Exploring Clients' Experiences of Using Journaling in Coaching

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## Abstract

Although dialogue is the main medium of communication in the helping professions, writing, mainly throughout journaling, has been extensively used in different therapeutic contexts. However, there has been little research into the use of journaling in coaching. This study investigates how the use of journal prompts in coaching affects client experiences. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology. Findings suggest that the prompts optimised and enhanced the coaching experience. The study provides coaches and researchers with exciting insights into the use of journal prompts in coaching and their impact on client experiences.

## Keywords

journaling, journal prompts, writing, coaching, interpretative phenomenological analysis

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## Introduction

Coaching as a field continues to evolve, develop and expand, and with that comes the evolution of different coaching tools, techniques and methods that enhance its effectiveness (Stober & Grant, 2006). It has been suggested that journaling and, more specifically, 'journal prompts' (questions that can be used as a prompt for journal writing), are valuable, distinctive and creative tools used in one-to-one coaching (Doherty, 2009). They allow the exploration of unconventional methods within the coaching domain (Whitaker, 2009; Gash, 2017). The use of creative tools and methods can provide alternative insights and perspectives around an individual's situation and enable people to explore complex issues (Ramos-Volz, 2018; Donaldson-Wright & Hefferon, 2020). Many parallels can be found between coaching and the creative process (Fumoto, 2016), with the International

Coach Federation (2021) defining coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential”. Defining creativity, however, can be problematic due to a variety of cultural, sociological, and historical interpretations and meanings (Boden, 2004; Kampylis & Valtanen, 2010). Gash (2017) proposes a simple definition: “creativity equals bringing something new into being” (p. 5). It is through this concept of newness that the use of creative approaches in coaching can open new pathways, opportunities and new ways of thinking and being for clients (Kets de Vries, 2014).

There is limited exploration of creative methods within coaching in the research literature, although some examples include those looking at the use of narratives and stories (Vogel, 2012), poetry (Chittenden, 2014), imagery and visualisation (Jack, Boyatzis, Khawaju, Passarelli and Lackie, 2013), and a more recent piece of research looking at the use of photography in coaching (Donaldson-Wright & Hefferon, 2020). This last study explored the use of photography as a creative and alternative method within the coaching setting and, more specifically, how the use of photography affects client’s experiences of engagement and accessibility in coaching. Donaldson-Wright and Hefferon’s (2020) research inspired the design of this study which seeks to understand and explore the use of journal writing in coaching and, in particular, the client experience of using journal prompts outside of, and in addition to, coaching sessions.

## Literature Review

### Writing to explore, discover and create narratives

Most types of writing form a narrative or story. Written narratives are used alongside other narrative types to help create meaning and understanding of an individual’s surroundings, experiences, and world (Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Richardson & St Pierre, 2005; Thompson, 2011). Bruner (1987) states that humans have a biological predisposition to understand and comprehend their surroundings via narratives, and Riessman (2007) considers that “narratives are everywhere, but not everything is narrative” (p. 4). It is through such narratives that stories are generated to navigate, understand and essentially live life (Hardy, 1968; Vogel, 2012). Thus, writing and the creation of these narratives, can help to offer “new perspectives and meaning” (Costa & Abreu, 2018, p. 69) to the processing of information. Journal writing specifically helps to make sense of ones’ experiences, helping individuals to heal and to grow (Hussain, 2010; Thompson, 2011). It can also help to express what one may find difficult to verbalise (Sheather, 2019).

### Expressive writing & journal writing

Since the 1980s, expressive writing, described as the act of writing about emotional, stressful and traumatic experiences (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999), has been at the forefront of research around the concept of writing to improve wellbeing, especially in relation to processing negative emotions and experiences (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). More recently, research has added to this concept by looking at writing about a complete spectrum of emotions including positive ones (Burton & King 2009; Bhullar, Schutte and Malouff, 2011; Hayes & Hefferon, 2015). Notably, the field of positive psychology has embraced writing as a powerful intervention in many ways (Parks & Schueller, 2014). In particular, King’s (2001) work around the Best Possible Self (BPS) intervention and writing “narrative descriptions” (p. 800) has proven to encourage positive action taking and behaviour in relation to working towards one’s goals and the future that one has imagined for oneself (Loveday et al., 2018; Schippers & Ziegler, 2019). Writing with a more positive focus has since been replicated in studies looking at retirement (Round & Burke, 2018), writing about meaningful experiences (Bhullar et al., 2011) and writing expressively through a positive lens (Hayes & Hefferon, 2015).

Research around the use of writing for more than just processing emotions and specifically the use of journal writing has also been explored with cancer patients, (Smith, Anderson-Hanley, Langrock & Compas, 2005), students (Walker, 2006), veterans (Cook, Simiola, McCarthy, Ellis & Stirman, 2018) and nurses (Brathovde, Bodine, Cagliostro, Lopresti, Perumpail & Paliscoe, 2013). There is also a wealth of research around journaling in therapeutic settings that will be explored next.

## **The use of journal writing in therapy**

Much of the current research around journal writing, focuses on its use in therapeutic or counselling settings. The use of journal writing in therapy looks to understand how it can be used as a tool to “understand the self in greater detail and depth” (Thompson, 2011, p.26). Journal writing seeks to help the client to understand more about their life and experiences, whilst also aiding in the creation of new behaviours and constructing new narratives around themselves (Stone, 1998). Journal writing has been used as a tool to help individuals heal, grow and live a rich and fulfilling life (Rainer, 1977; Adams, 1990; Thompson, 2011). The literature on therapy settings has also shown that journal writing can provide clients with a sense of power (Bolton, 1998; Wright & Chung, 2001). Furthermore, it can offer clients access to memories and experiences that they can make sense of through the action of writing and also creates a record of events that they can unpack and work through (Bolton, 1998). Finally, journal writing enables individuals to make sense of and understand their thoughts, feelings and experiences (Bolton, Field & Thompson, 2006).

Journaling as a process, however, is not limited to just writing (Stone, 1998). Other forms of journaling or expressive processes that have been explored within therapy include the use of music (Barry & O’Callaghan, 2008), art, drawings and visuals (Deaver & McAuliffe, 2009; Mims, 2015) and other forms of nonverbal expression, for example, dance and drama (Borkin, 2014; Zimmerman & Mangelsdorf, 2020). The key to encouraging any form of journaling or expression with a client is emphasising the creative part to promote and increase self-reflection and understanding of the self (Rich & Copans, 1998; Wood, 2013).

## **Creative coaching and journal writing**

Coaching in its most basic form is the act of “empowering people by facilitating self-directed learning, personal growth and improved performance” (Bresser & Wilson, 2010, p. 10). The most common form of coaching is a conversation in one to one or group settings. Although conversations are an effective way to communicate within the coaching setting, sometimes clients may find it difficult to verbalise something they want to express. In more recent years, this has been acknowledged within the field of coaching where studies have started to look at using creative methods to encourage easier communication, or alternative ways to express how one is feeling or to make sense of a situation. Research around creative methods in coaching includes, art-based coaching (Ramos-Volz, 2018), coaching with music (Turner, 2020; McManus & Giraldez-Hayes, 2021), walking coaching (Turner, 2017), dance (Klyk, Palmer and Zimmerman, 2022), coaching using puppets (Turner, 2016) and narrative coaching (Drake, 2007). Doherty (2009) has also explored the use of writing in support of coaching for not just the client but also the coach and potentially the coach supervisor. All these researchers have found that using more creative methods within the coaching environment can elicit deeper thinking and “more purposeful action” (Turner, 2017, p. 84).

Doherty (2009) also highlights the value of writing and reflecting on the “dynamics of the coaching process” (p. 78), with the use of a reflective journaling recommended for coaches to enhance their practice (Jackson, 2004; Kovacs & Corrie, 2017). Recent years have also witnessed a growth and development of the use of writing within the self-inquiry, self-help and personal development domains, including that of web-based journals or ‘blogs, as well as keeping a physical journal (Doherty, 2009; Siles, 2012). Among its many benefits, when used in the capacity of coaching

"writing naturally encourages the expansion and flow that are both helpful in the creative and coaching process" (Gash, 2017, p. 71).

Many creative techniques that have proven successful within the realms of psychotherapy have since been explored, adapted and developed to be used within the coaching domain (Abravanel & Gavin, 2017). This study seeks to contribute to the knowledge and research into the use of creative methods within coaching, specifically looking at how using journal prompts in coaching is experienced by clients. The research aims to explore the following question: How does using journal prompts in coaching affect client experiences?

## Methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has been chosen as the research methodology for this study to enable a rich understanding of the client's experience of using creative methods and, in this case, journal writing within coaching (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). IPA as a methodology seeks to examine "how people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith et al., 2009, p.1), whilst also enabling the researcher to gain an "insider perspective of lived experiences" (Noon, 2018, p. 75). IPA draws upon three key areas: phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). It is a non-prescriptive and flexible methodology which means that there are guidelines to be considered, however they can be adapted to accommodate the phenomena being researched (Noon, 2018).

IPA takes the stance that humans are always trying to make sense of their experiences and the world around them. Central to that interpretation and for the purposes of research is the double hermeneutic, meaning that not only is the participant trying to make sense of their experience, but the researcher is also trying to make sense of the participant making sense of their experience (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). As with all qualitative research methods, reflexivity plays an important role for the researcher to be aware of how their own experiences, values and beliefs may influence the research (Etherington, 2004; Willig, 2013). As a result, a reflexive practice was carried out throughout the research.

## The Coaching Intervention

The researchers designed a specific coaching intervention to ensure a seamless incorporation of journaling with coaching. The specific intervention consisted of four, weekly one to one virtual one-hour coaching sessions. The participants were sent a set of specifically curated journal prompts ahead of each session. As explained, journal prompts are questions that can be used as a prompt for journal writing. An example of a prompt used for this research is *How does thinking and writing about the future make you feel?* Each week was focused on a different topic starting with the client's goal and what they wanted to achieve, followed by looking at their future, then writing about their current life situation, and finishing on the progress that they had made and key actions they could take away to continue moving forward with their goal achievement.

For the first coaching session, the client was invited to share a summary of their journal entry in response to the journal prompts for that week, they were informed to only share what they felt comfortable sharing. The session was guided by this topic, ensuring there was also a focus on moving the client towards achieving their goal and working on any other areas that the client felt they wanted help and support with. The remaining three sessions followed this same structure.

## Recruitment of Participants

Recruitment was carried out via an email advert to the researcher's business mailing list. The advert included information about the requirements of the specific coaching intervention and the

aims of the study. Those who expressed an interest were requested to send an email response to the researcher, following this a formal participation invitation letter was sent along with a link to book an introductory virtual call. This call enabled a discussion to take place about the nature of the research, the specific coaching intervention, ascertaining an overarching goal for the potential participant and the ability for the interested individual to ask any questions. Once this virtual call had taken place, five individuals were selected on a first come, first served basis, they were notified and once they had agreed to participate, they were sent a formal consent letter as well as a contract to sign. It was important for the selection criteria that all five participants had a tangible overarching goal that they wanted to work on as well as a commitment to the coaching process. This was discussed on the introductory call to ensure the participants were suitable to take part in the research. Following this, four one-hour coaching sessions were organised as well as an informal interview and the first set of journal prompts were sent to the participants to complete ahead of the first coaching session.

The final sample consisted of five female participants, all with no prior experience of life coaching, but with some experience of journaling. They all committed to participating in the coaching sessions and to completing the journal prompts outside of the sessions. Prior to advertisement and recruitment, the research was approved by the University of East London, School of Psychology's Ethics Committee.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Each coaching session began with a five-to-ten-minute discussion exploring participant experience of completing that week's journaling prompts; with participant consent, these discussions were recorded. Following completion of all four coaching sessions, each participant was invited to participate in a 45-60 minute semi-structured informal interview which was recorded. All recorded interviews were transcribed to enable analysis. There was a total of twenty-five data collection points for analysis as can be seen in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Data collection points**

	Session 1 pre-coaching session discussion	Session 2 pre-coaching session discussion	Session 3 pre-coaching session discussion	Session 4 pre-coaching session discussion	Semi-structured informal interview	Total
<b>Participant 1</b>	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	5
<b>Participant 2</b>	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	5
<b>Participant 3</b>	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	5
<b>Participant 4</b>	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	5
<b>Participant 5</b>	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	Data collected	5
						25

## Coding & Analysis

Taking guidance from both Smith et al. (2009) and Larkin & Thompson (2012) and noting that "there is no clear right or wrong way of conducting this type of analysis" (p. 80), we embarked on the data analysis process by first reading and re-reading the interview transcripts individually for each participant. For the first reading, we also listened to the audio recording of the interview, as this helps researchers to "immerse themselves in the data" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 367). Following this, we further immersed ourselves by actively engaging with the transcripts through descriptive, linguistic and conceptual exploration and coding. Emergent themes were then identified with the aim of reducing the volume of data whilst maintaining the complexities found

within the transcripts (Smith et al., 2009). Abstraction and subsumption were useful tools to enable the identification of relationships and patterns across emergent themes and subsequent clusters (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, three main themes and nine sub-themes were identified across all participant transcript data, and these will be explored next.

## Findings

Following analysis of the interview transcripts, three main themes each with three sub-themes were identified and are displayed in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Main themes and sub-themes**

Main Theme	Sub-theme
1. Journal prompts optimise and enhance the coaching experience	1.1 Providing focus and guidance
	1.2 Encouraging motivation and action taking
	1.3 Enabling preparation for the coaching sessions
2. Journal prompts enable deeper exploration	2.1 Opportunity for further inquiry
	2.2 Feelings of being challenged but also excitement & enjoyment
	2.3 Solutions could be found on the page
3. Journal prompts empower the client	3.1 Realising what they want from life and a clear future vision
	3.2 Development of the true, authentic self
	3.3 Bringing the client to the present moment

### 1. Journal prompts optimise and enhance the coaching experience

The completion of journal prompts ahead of, and in between, coaching sessions enhanced the experience for the participants in several ways as explained below.

#### 1.1 Providing focus and guidance

All participants highlighted how completing the journal prompts provided focus and guidance in between the coaching sessions. When asked how about the experience of using the journal prompts alongside the coaching Violet explained:

*It was amazing because it's...a guidance...like having a guide because sometimes if you want to write about something...there are thousands of ideas or thousands of questions but, to have the prompt...you have the material to focus, to sit down and dig deep and try to find the way.*

The prompts enabled the exploration of thoughts and ideas in a more structured and deep way. Sarah commented:

*I found it helpful because the way I've always journaled is just writing with nothing to guide me...having a specific question meant I was focused on something, and I found it a lot easier to write.*

This demonstrates how the prompts enabled Sarah to write more effectively, allowing for further exploration on the page. Becky added that the prompts were like “someone’s holding your hand and saying here you go, you have the support”; this helped her to feel safe and supported to explore further than she had before.

#### 1.2 Encouraging motivation and action taking

An observation by all participants was how the prompts combined with the coaching sessions improved their motivation and encouraged action-taking. Hope felt without the coaching there

would be no action:

*With the journal prompts just on their own, it's like where's the actions? How do you move forward with it?...it's just...words on the page...then with the coaching...that exploration... what's your actions now and how can we change and move forward from what has come out of these prompts?*

All participants felt that progress would be a lot slower without the two methods combined, Violet stated how “both things go perfectly together”.

### **1.3 Enabling preparation for the coaching sessions**

The journal prompts helped all participants to feel prepared for the coaching sessions. As the participants were all new to coaching this made them feel more at ease, Sarah described how she used her writing as “something to lean back on...kind of a safety blanket” for the session.

The prompts gave all participants time to think about the weekly topic ahead of the coaching session which they all found helpful and effective. Kirsty explained:

*...it's my time that I get to focus solely on me...I spend quiet time just writing...no distractions. Just doing the journaling, so that I can better understand myself... we spend an awful lot of time not knowing ourselves...not understanding why things are... a problem. It's only by doing these sorts of questions that you start to understand.... what's coming up for you that you need to work on to move forward.*

The participants felt as though the prompts were the starting point or foundation, with the coaching session building on what they had written or discovered, thus enabling a more enhanced coaching experience.

## **2. Journal prompts enable deeper exploration**

The journal prompts were an opportunity for deeper thinking and exploration outside of the coaching sessions, enabling the participants to experience breakthroughs and realisations within their writing.

### **2.1 Opportunity for further inquiry**

All participants felt the writing enabled further exploration on the page leading to realisations they may not have had through just talking. Kirsty commented, “I wouldn't be able to say all of this I've written because that's not how conversations work”. The participants also expressed how the prompts helped to unearth new ways of thinking and perceiving their world; for example, Kirsty added:

*Whilst this was clearly inside me, it's just not something that I had thought about, it's not something that was really in my frame of reference...but because this was a prompt, this has now changed how I see my life.*

Hope found having the ability to explore things on the paper first, then bringing it to the session helpful:

*...if I just had the session without that prompt...I don't think I would have been able to explore that as in-depth, I'm not sure it would be in the forefront of my mind and well, I definitely don't think I would have been able to reach that conclusion.*

The prompts brought old and new thoughts, ideas and beliefs to the forefront of participant minds. Some commented on how the prompts opened metaphorical doors, both new and old, Violet added “to write that and to think about that, it’s like it opened a door that was closed for a long while”. The prompts generated further inquiry in a variety of ways and led to positive action taking.

## 2.2 Feelings of being challenged but also excitement & enjoyment

All participants commented at some point during the intervention about how they had found the prompts challenging. However, they recognised that being and feeling uncomfortable is a sign of growth and helps them to move forward, Kirsty shared:

*I don't want it to be easy, I want it to push me out of my comfort zone...it pushes you to really think and feel, and that's when you're doing the work.*

This suggested that Kirsty wanted to be challenged and to change her way of thinking and being. Similarly, Hope echoes this “although I use the word challenging, it’s a positive challenging, I mean, it’s like taking you out of your comfort zone”

Mixed emotions were experienced by most participants during the process, when describing the prompts Violet highlighted “some were exciting, others were kind of scary”. Some participants expressed previous feelings of avoidance or resistance to the types of questions that the prompts proposed, Becky said:

*...this future journal prompt is something I've always resisted...because I knew they would shed so much light on limiting behaviours that I didn't want to face... So that was a big a-ha moment, like fresh perspective...just through a prompt. I was like wow.*

This highlights how previous avoidance of such questions prevented participants from being able to identify new perspectives and how this experience gave them the ability to identify and become aware of that behaviour and move past it.

## 2.3 Solutions could be found on the page

All participants agreed that by using the prompts, they also processed problems in their journals, enabling them to find their own solutions. Sarah shared:

*I wrote a lot about moving forward, like the things I could do to fix the gap between where I am and where I would be. Whereas before I would just write the problem and I wouldn't write any solution...but...now I'd write a problem, then I'd write oh, you could do this.*

This suggests the participants were able to identify what was stopping them from moving forward, helping them to identify their problems and develop new skills to manage them, which may have taken longer to discover through talking and not processing in their journals.

## 3. Journal prompts empower the client

Completing the journal prompts alongside the coaching sessions empowered the participants to realise what they want from life and to feel hopeful and motivated to work towards that future.

### 3.1 Realising what they want from life & a clear future vision

All participants agreed that the future prompts enabled them to create a clear vision of their future which was realistic and achievable. Writing about the future gave the participants hope, Kirsty explains:



*...this has now changed how I see my life. This has changed what I'm gonna...work towards for the future so this has given me something that's so important it's given me hope for the future... I didn't have before and probably have never really had.*

This was echoed by Hope who shared:

*I remember feeling encouraged and...like there is hope...and there's a path and it's not insurmountable...and me starting that path like that's just gonna...help like my whole life, really.*

The participants expressed how the journal prompts provided them with clarity around the path they are on, Violet described her experience:

*Everything was so uncertain and that lack of clarity...I wrote at the very beginning...having clarity and direction makes me think about a plane landing in the night., everything is dark but the pilot has the little lights on the runway indicating the path...the clarity...allows me to have some little lights to say, OK, you can continue and you know your path...So that was massive, starting to see...the things that are important to me.*

All participants felt they had the freedom to write about the future they envisioned for themselves, writing without any judgement. Kirsty described how the prompts enabled her to think about “living [her] best life with intention”, this came through for most participants, encouraging expansive thinking and a heightened awareness of what they want from their life and what actions they need to take to create that reality.

### **3.2 Development of the true, authentic self**

All participants felt the prompts, alongside the coaching were a catalyst for change, helping to unearth their real, true selves and start to understand what that looks like. Kirsty used a metaphor to describe this:

*I... likened myself to a caterpillar...ready to crawl into my chrysalis to make the change...And I thought that's a pretty lovely way to think about changing and transforming that you're then gonna go into this chrysalis and...come out this amazing...complete surprise.*

Feelings of growth or evolution of self were expressed by all participants, whilst accepting where they currently are and identifying what they need to do to evolve further. Sarah said, “I was much more...accepting of where I am now...I know where I eventually want to be”. A sense of self confidence and empowerment came through for all participants in relation to moving forward and knowing what they want for themselves. Becky shared how she “noticed...expansion from doubt to confidence”. Hope also added:

*...I think it was a catalyst, but also like a realisation that actually I kind of feel a bit trapped...I have all these exciting ideas and extensive imagination, how am I gonna make it happen?*

Once again, these realisations and questions motivated the participants to start taking action towards becoming their true, authentic selves.

### **3.3 Bringing the client to the present moment**

The journal prompts had the power to bring all participants to the present moment, enabling them to leave the past in the past and have a more forward-focused approach to life. Kirsty observed when using the prompts:

*...they're looking forward...that's very helpful because I spend far too much time looking back. So, to stay in the present, which is where I very rarely am and look forward...from that*

*perspective the prompts have been invaluable. Just keeping me on track and keeping me in the present.*

This process empowered the participants to become aware of their current state, for Becky there was a realisation around this:

*... one obvious thing for me...was how stuck I've been in the past...I'm giving so much energy to my past...you lose so much touch with yourself and the present moment...and yeah...one of the most empowering things to remember, to just be in the now and to trust"*

Participants reflected that they can't stay stuck in the past, life goes on. Hope expressed this when sharing how she found the combination of the journal prompts and coaching:

*...I think it's kind of revolutionary...I think it's...a way of tapping into your subconscious. And addressing issues...or thoughts or feelings or ideas that you maybe didn't even know you had because you're too busy doing XY and Z.*

Suggesting that the prompts both enabled and empowered the participants to take the time to become present with themselves, to stop and think about their life situation, and to ask themselves further questions. All participants found that they were asking themselves more questions than they usually would as a result of the intervention. Questioning and challenging their current reality and identifying the actions they need or wanted to take to work towards their desired future, subsequently leaving the past behind.

## Discussion

This study aimed to understand and explore clients' experience of using journaling alongside coaching. The findings suggest several positive benefits for adopting the use of journal prompts as a coaching intervention with clients. The use of journal prompts seemed to both optimise and enhance the coaching experience, providing focus and guidance for the client both within and beyond the coaching session. It is important for clients to feel supported and guided during coaching (Passmore, 2021), so, in addition to being guided and supported by the coach during the conversation, the journal prompts continued that support for the clients beyond the session. This provided an opportunity for the client to continue receiving powerful and thought-provoking questions via the journal prompts, enabling further self-inquiry and deeper exploration in a challenging yet exciting way. This aligns with findings from a similar study using photography alongside coaching (Donaldson-Wright & Hefferon, 2020).

The participants all commented on how they could not imagine the coaching being as effective without the journaling to support it, they felt their progress would have been slower without the two combined. The study also found participants felt that without the coaching sessions, the prompts may have simply been writing on a page and there would have been no action-taking. The physical act of writing and processing their answers to the prompts on the page enabled accountability, perspective and the processing of asking themselves 'what's next?'. This would then be discussed within the coaching session leading to more accountability and motivation to take action. Similar results were found in a study using positive expressive writing, moving from the page and encouraging positive action taking (Hayes & Hefferon, 2015). This finding may suggest the specific coaching intervention could be useful for clients who want to make faster progress in a shorter period of time. This could be an area for further research comparing the progress of coaching interventions with and without journal prompts.

All participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the research knowing they wanted to make changes in their lives. However, they were all new to coaching with a basic awareness of the

methodology. For some, they still were not entirely sure what to expect from the sessions, leading to feelings of apprehension or nervousness. The journal prompts provided a support system or opportunity for participants to prepare ahead of the session. This process provided extra guidance and helped with client readiness and commitment to the coaching experience (Kretzschmar, 2010).

The findings suggest that writing about the future enabled the clients to develop a clear vision of what they wanted to work towards. The future self-prompts completed in week 2 were based loosely on the Best Possible Self intervention (King 2001). All participants commented on feeling hopeful, optimistic and positive about the future they envisioned for themselves. They also felt motivated to start taking action towards that vision, echoing findings from studies looking at the effectiveness of writing about the future self (Loveday et al., 2016; Round & Burke, 2018). This finding continues to highlight the importance and effectiveness of encouraging clients to focus on the future and how it can be enhanced through the use of journaling as opposed to simply talking about it.

The act of writing in a journal enabled all participants the opportunity for deeper exploration in a place where they felt safe and free of judgement. Also enabling them time to process their problems, find their own solutions and start taking positive actions and changes to move forward. This aligns with findings from a recent study using an art-based coaching intervention (Ramos Volz, 2018). These findings show how the use of alternative, creative methods within the coaching environment allow the client to reflect, express and explore their emotions, thoughts and feelings on a deeper level compared to just a verbal conversation. The ability to make sense of their thoughts and feelings, whilst developing a deeper understanding of themselves and their emotions has been found to significantly help clients implement effective change in their life (Franklin, 2005).

All participants experienced a change in their life narrative as a result of participating in the coaching intervention. All came to the sessions with a 'story' about their current life situation and through completion of the journal prompts, coaching sessions and exploration of new thoughts, ideas and possibilities, new narratives were crafted especially concerning their future. This awareness and narrative exploration by the client led to the evolution and development of self, aligning with findings from a study looking at the role of narrative in coaching (Vogel, 2012). The study also found that using the journal prompts helped to develop participant perspective and to bring them into a more present and future-focused state of mind. This empowered the participants once again to start taking positive action to start embodying their new narrative and self, echoing findings from a paper looking at journaling as a therapeutic strategy (Stone, 1998) and also writing within therapy settings (Bolton, 1998; Wright & Chung, 2001).

The findings from this study echo much of the literature surrounding the positive benefits of writing for understanding and making sense of life experiences (Pennebaker, 1997; Thompson, 2011; Costa & Abreu, 2018). All participants felt encouraged, motivated and excited during the intervention, they felt empowered to delve deeper into the realms of self-inquiry and develop their own solutions to problems they had previously avoided. Through writing about their future vision, they realised what they want from life and also experienced positive changes and evolution of the self. Thus, the findings suggest the use of journal prompts with coaching optimise and enhance the coaching experience, promoting positive change and motivating clients to take positive action.

## **Limitations and considerations**

The findings from this research suggest the use of journaling in coaching positively affects the clients' experience, however, there are a few limitations and considerations that need to be commented on.

For this particular study all participants were new to life coaching, therefore had no prior experience of coaching and nothing to compare this particular experience to. Participants with experience of

coaching may have experienced the specific coaching intervention differently, this could be an opportunity for future studies.

The dual coach/researcher role could have impacted on the design and findings of the research and although a reflexive approach was adopted throughout, this is something to bear in mind. Only one coach was used for the delivery of the coaching sessions for this intervention meaning only one type of coaching style was experienced by the participants. Results could be different with a different coach with a different coaching style or approach. The journal prompts used for the specific coaching intervention had a positive and forward-focused theme, journal prompts with a different focus could have meant different findings.

By sharing this research into the experience of using journal prompts alongside coaching, this study draws attention to the potential that journal prompts may have in developing the engagement, reflection and awareness capacities of coaching clients. For coaches, these findings suggest the use of journal prompts might be used to expand the impact of coaching conversations.

## Conclusion

This study contributes positive new insights and knowledge around the use of journal writing in coaching. The aim of this study was to understand how the use of journal prompts in coaching affects the client experience. Overall, the findings indicate that they affect the client experience positively.

Engagement in, and completion of, journal prompts outside of the coaching sessions enabled deeper exploration and expansive thinking from the client perspective. They provided an opportunity for reflection and independent problem solving, whilst also allowing for the participant to develop and grow as an individual. Journal prompts encouraged the creation of new narratives and, in addition to the coaching sessions, helped the client to move forward with positive action taking.

Further research using different prompts could be beneficial, for example research with participants who have previous experience of coaching. A larger study could also be carried out using several different coaches to enable a wider understanding of whether different coaching styles impact the findings.

Finally, this study provides coaches and researchers with new understanding about the potential benefits for clients who make use of journal writing alongside coaching.

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