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COACHING

The Implications of Self-Kindness for the Effectiveness of Coaching:  
Self-Compassion Moderates the Impact of Solution- vs. Problem-Focused Coaching  
Questions on Action Planning

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## Abstract

Recently, researchers have begun to explore the impact of different coaching approaches on a variety of variables related to positive change. However, it is still unknown how, why, and for whom different coaching approaches might work. Taking a resource-based approach to coaching and using an experimental 2 X 2 factorial design we examined whether the effectiveness of different coaching approaches (solution- (SF) vs. problem-focused (PF)) on action-planning depends on the coachees' personal resource of self-compassion (low vs. high). The hypothesis that SF will lead to more effective action-planning as compared to PF coaching questions, especially when self-compassion is low was largely supported on one out of three action-planning criteria (i.e., fluency). SF led to effective action-planning both for those with low and high self-compassion. As expected, PF led to more effective action-planning for those with high, rather than low self-compassion. Surprisingly, coachees' with high self-compassion benefited slightly more from PF than SF coaching. Unfortunately, our predictions that this effect would be mediated by positive (activating) mood and/or focused attention were not supported. We suggest future research directions, and discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

Keywords: COACHING, SELF-COMPASSION, PROBLEM FOCUS, SOLUTION FOCUS, MOOD, ATTENTION, ACTION PLANNING

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The use of coaching as a tool for individual and organizational development has increased considerably over the last few decades. This is reflected in the fact that there were 41,300 professional coaches worldwide generating close to \$2 billion (USD) in annual revenue/income in 2012 (International Coach Federation; ICF), a figure that is probably even higher today. Coaching can be broadly defined as "the art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another" (Downey, 2003, p. 21). More specifically, coaching entails 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, nonclinical clients" (Grant, 2003, p. 254).

While we know that, generally, coaching is effective as it positively influences performance and skills, well being, coping, work attitudes, and goal directed self-regulation (for a meta-analysis, see Theeboom, Beersma, & Van Vianen, 2013), it is still unclear how, why, and for whom different coaching approaches might work. Filling this void, we take a resource-based approach to coaching (Theeboom, Beersma, & Van Vianen, 2014) and propose that the presence (absence) of personal resources inherent to the coachee will determine the extent to which different coaching approaches are effective. Personal resources are the aspects of the self that are linked to resiliency and that reflect individuals' sense of ability to successfully control and impact their environment, especially when one is facing challenges (Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis, & Jackson, 2003; p. 632). Personal resources are recognized as "essential to optimal human functioning" (Bono, Glomb, Shen, Kim, &

Koch, 2013; p. 1602), and can as such, be especially relevant in the context of coaching where one is attempting to achieve a purposeful change. We also propose two potential mechanisms that could explain how the interplay between different coaching approaches and presence (absence) of personal resources affects the effectiveness of coaching. Drawing from the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Emotions (Frederickson, 1998, 2001) and the creative problem solving literature (e.g., Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008) we propose positive (activating) mood as the first process underlying the effectiveness of coaching. Based on the previous research on attention (e.g., Kaplan & Berman, 2010), rumination (e.g., Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1993, 1995), and mindfulness (e.g., Ortner, Kilner, & Zelazo, 2007) we further propose focused attention as the process linking different coaching approaches and personal resources on the one side and coaching outcomes on the other. Given the prevalence of coaching and its related high costs, it is necessary to expedite the empirically based knowledge on coaching in order to ground coaching practices on firm empirical, rather than anecdotal evidence (Latham, 2007). This will in turn contribute to the development of more effective coaching interventions, and help justify the value of this costly resource.

Effective questioning is the essence of every coaching conversation (Grant & O'Connor, 2010) and question asking is the main tool coaches use to establish coachees' goals and develop action plans to facilitate coachees' goal attainment (Neenan, 2009). When asking questions, a coach can focus on analyzing problems in an attempt to uncover their causes by asking 'Why' a problem arose (i.e., Problem-focused coaching approach). This coaching approach stems from the Cognitive-behavioral theory (i.e., Grant & O'Connor, 2010) and is based on the assumption that the knowledge of problem aetiology is necessary for goal progression (Grant &

O'Connor, 2010). Alternatively, a coach can focus on the solutions to a problem, and ask 'How' a person can utilize her strengths and resources in order to attain a desired goal (i.e., Solution-focused coaching approach; Grant, 2012). This coaching approach stems from Solution-focused brief therapy (De Shazer, 1988) and is based on the assumption that the knowledge of problem aetiology is unnecessary for the solution construction and the movement towards the goal-attainment (Grant & O'Connor, 2010).

In general, a few studies that have compared the impact of solution- versus problem-focused coaching questions on a range of variables relevant for the facilitation of positive change, found that a solution-focused approach is more effective at increasing positive affect, self-efficacy, action-planning, as well as confidence in one's ability to deal with the problem (Grant, 2012; Grant & O'Connor, 2010; Wehr, 2010). However, abandoning problem-focused in favor of solution-focused coaching would be premature, especially given the evidence that this type of cognitive-behavioral therapies are shown to be effective for dealing with the wide range of problems and within a variety of populations (Ost, 2008; Proudfoot, Corr, Guest, & Dunn, 2009). Further, in reality, coaching conversations are not entirely solution- or problem-focused, but instead "coaches move between these approaches to best meet the needs of the coachee" (Grant & O'Connor, 2010, p.109; Grant, 2012). Many coachees want to explore their problem, a process that they can experience as cathartic and helpful for the goal attainment (Grant & O'Connor, 2010). Denying them this opportunity can alienate coachees and reduce rapport (Grant, 2012) which represents a key process for building coach-coachee relationship and is associated with self-disclosure, satisfaction (Boyce, Jackson, & Neal, 2010), and most importantly, with achieving coaching outcomes (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007).

Nonetheless, the evidence that problem-focused approach does not increase positive affect and the understanding of the nature of the problem (Grant & O'Connor, 2010), but can instead increase negative affect (Theeboom, 2013) or can even be detrimental for coachees' self-confidence (Wehr, 2010) should also not be ignored.

The question now becomes: How can coaches determine what type of coaching questions they should ask and to whom in order to a) best meet the needs of every coachee, and b) to maximize the benefits of coaching for each coachee? In an attempt to answer these questions, in the current study we focus on coachees' personal resources, an avenue that has to date not yet been explored within the context of coaching. More specifically, we focus on the coachees' level of self-compassion, as a personal resource that might determine the degree of effectiveness of problem- versus solution-focused coaching. Self-compassion is about how people treat themselves during difficult times and it "involves being open to and moved by one's own suffering, experiencing feelings of caring and kindness toward oneself, taking an understanding, nonjudgmental attitude toward one's inadequacies and failures, and recognizing that one's own experience is a part of the common human experience" (Neff, 2003a; p.224). By its very nature, self-compassion falls well within the Hobfoll et al.'s (2003) definition of personal resources as self-compassion can buffer people against negative life events (Leary, Tate, Adams, Batts Allen, & Hancock, 2007) and alleviate the pain of personal suffering (Neff & Germer, 2013). At the same time, self-compassion allows a clear comprehension of the immediate situation without the overwhelming feelings of anxiety, hereby motivating people to grow and change (Neff, 2003b) As such, self-compassion might have a decisive role in how coachees respond to coaching approaches that emphasize their problems (i.e., problem-focus) versus their strengths (i.e., solution-focus) hereby affecting the coaching effectiveness.

In assessing the degree of coaching effectiveness we turn to the coachees' action-planning ability. Action-planning involves the development of plans of action by listing as many as possible diverse action steps that can be readily implemented in "real-life" and that can help coachees reach their goal and/or solve their problem (Grant, 2012). Action-planning is an important step in the coaching process that facilitates the coachee's movement through the self-regulatory cycle towards goal-attainment (Grant, 2003) and is considered to be "an objective outcome measure of performance and motivation" (Grant, 2012; p. 31). In this paper we argue that self-compassion is a personal resource crucial for maximizing the benefits that can be drawn from different coaching approaches. More specifically, we argue that coachees with low self-compassion are more sensitive to the problem exploration inherent to problem-focused coaching due to their critical and judgmental self-attitudes (Neff, 2003a). Therefore, coachees with low self-compassion will respond more negatively to the problem-focus coaching questions than coachees with high self-compassion, displaying less effective action-planning. Solution-focused coaching questions, on the other hand, will compensate for the absence of the self-compassion resource through its general focus on coachees' strengths and resources, and will therefore lead to the effective action planning independently of the coachees' level of self-compassion. That is, those with high self-compassion will benefit from both problem- and solution-focused coaching, while those with low self-compassion will benefit more from solution- than problem-focused coaching.

First we provide a brief overview of the self-compassion literature and place it in the context of coaching. We formulate specific hypotheses regarding the influence of problem- versus solution-focused coaching question on the action-planning ability of coachees with low versus high self-compassion. Next, to contribute to the scarce

theoretical coaching literature (Feldman & Lankau, 2005) and further the understanding of the mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of different coaching approaches, we propose positive (activating) mood and focused attention as two possible mediating processes (See Figure 1). Finally, we present an experiment designed to test our hypotheses.

### *The Moderating Role of Self-Compassion*

Self-compassion is a relatively new construct in Western psychology that is derived from Eastern philosophy and Buddhism and that plays a crucial role in how people deal with and respond to their life problems and how they cognitively treat themselves following mistakes (Neff, 2003a, 2003b, 2009). Self-compassion is a higher-order construct that consists of three basic components (i.e., self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) that are experienced differently and are conceptually distinct, but at the same time they tend to mutually enhance and engender one another (Neff, 2003a). They are defined as follows: 1) Self-kindness entails extending kindness and understanding to oneself in instances of pain or failure rather than harsh self-criticism and judgment; 2) Common humanity is about perceiving one's experiences as a part of larger human experience (a reality that we all share as human beings), rather than as separated and isolated; and 3) Mindfulness refers to holding one's painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them (Neff, 2003a; p.224).

From the wide range of personal resources that might impact the effectiveness of coaching, why did we focus specifically on self-compassion? First, self-compassion "provides a powerful motivating force for growth and change" (Neff, 2003b; p.87). Emotional safety experienced by self-compassionate individuals provides them with the clear and accurate perception of maladaptive patterns of thought, feeling, and

behavior (Brown, 1999, as cited in Neff, 2003b). Moreover, the absence of harsh self-judgment and self-criticism for their failings allows them the freedom from the protective functions of the ego that often screens inadequacies from the self-awareness and renders one's weaknesses unchallenged (Neff, 2003b). In that sense, one does not have to fear that self-compassion leads to passivity, but rather that it allows one's failings to be noticed and rectified (Neff, 2003b).

Empirical evidence supports the claims of positive influence of self-compassion on adaptive psychological functioning and well-being (Neff, 2003a; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007), as well as positive change, growth, and learning. Self-compassionate individuals experience lower levels of depression and anxiety (Neff, 2003a; Van Dam, Sheppard, Forsyth, & Earleywine, 2011), and more happiness, optimism, and wisdom (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007) than those with low levels of self-compassion. Further, those with high self-compassion experience greater perceived competence, less fear of failure, more intrinsic motivation, and less avoidance-oriented strategies even after experiencing failure (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005), as well as an increased self-improvement motivation (Breines & Chen, 2012), self-efficacy (Iskender, 2009), creativity (Zabelina & Robinson, 2010), and cognitive flexibility (Martin, Staggars, & Anderson, 2011). Self-compassion helps individuals to view their personal weaknesses as more changeable rather than fixed and immutable (i.e., high incremental beliefs), a mindset which is positively related to growth-related behaviors (Breines & Chen, 2012) and behavioral change (Kelly, Zuroff, Foa, & Gilbert, 2010). Taken altogether, it is hard not to see the potential benefits of high self-compassion for the effectiveness of coaching. By the same token, one must also acknowledge how the absence of self-compassion (i.e., low self-compassion) might hinder the effectiveness of coaching.

Second, self-compassion as compared to other personal resources that are often studied, in particular self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), offers benefits without any potential drawbacks. Even though self-compassion and self-esteem are related constructs, self-compassion is an alternative way of conceptualizing healthy self-attitudes that does not involve evaluations of self-worth (Neff & Vonk, 2009; p.25). Neff & Vonk (2009) demonstrated that when compared to self-esteem, self-compassion had stronger negative relationships with social comparison, self-evaluative anxiety, self-rumination, close-mindedness, and anger. Moreover, self-compassion was unrelated to, while self-esteem was positively related to narcissism. They concluded that self-compassion provides many of the benefits associated with high self-esteem, but without the drawbacks of protective ego-defense mechanisms often associated with the pursuit and maintenance of high self-esteem (p.44).

Finally, we chose to focus on self-compassion over other personal resources because recent research shows how self-compassion is a "trainable" construct (e.g., Baker & McNulty, 2011; Kelly, et al., 2010; Adams & Leary, 2007; Leary, et al., 2007; Gilbert, 2005, 2009; Neff & Germer, 2013) rather than "just" a stable trait. Attempts to raise self-compassion have shown promising results, while attempts to boost self-esteem have been quite unsuccessful (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). As such, self-compassion can be of particular interest to coaches who can focus on cultivating and nurturing self-compassionate mindsets so that their coachees can fully benefit from what coaching has to offer. For this reason, in the current study we have decided to manipulate, rather than simply measure coachees' self-compassion. This type of experimental design will not only allow us to draw causal conclusions about the interactive effects of different coaching approaches (problem- versus solution-focused coaching) and self-compassion (high versus low)

on coachees' action-planning, but will also allow us to examine to what extent the personal resource of self-compassion can be "induced" within the context of coaching.

As previously mentioned, we propose that coachees' level of self-compassion will determine the impact of problem- versus solution-focused coaching questions on their progress towards goal attainment, as indicated by their action-planning ability. It has been suggested that problem exploration can intensify current suffering (Wher, 2010) and be damaging for the coachee (Jackson & McKergow, 2002) as this type of ruminative self-focus impairs concentration, problem solving, and motivation (Lyubomirsky, Tucker, Caldwell, & Berg, 1999; Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1993, 1995). However, these maladaptive consequences of problem-focus only occur when combined with self-criticism, self-blame, and reduced self-confidence (Lyubomirsky, et al., 1999). As individuals with low self-compassion tend to be overly self-critical and judgmental, have difficulty distancing themselves from the situation, and over-identify with their painful thoughts and feelings (Neff, 2003a), for them, focusing on the problem will only amplify those tendencies and diminish their ability to engage in action-planning aimed at moving them closer towards their goal. Rather, focusing on the solutions by considering their strengths and abilities might better meet their needs and serve to mitigate negative effects of low self-compassion and promote hope of positive change, hereby facilitating the action-planning process.

On the other hand, self-compassionate individuals are understanding and nonjudgmental toward their inadequacies and failures, are better able to put their experiences into a greater perspective, and maintain balanced awareness of their thoughts and emotions (Neff, 2003a). As such, self-compassion may serve as a buffer against the negative consequences of problem-focus and allow change and self-improvement without being overwhelmed with failure anxiety (Neff, Hsieh, &

Dejitterat, 2005) enabling those with high self-compassion to effectively develop their action-plans even under problem exploration. Moreover, for people with high self-compassion, thinking about their problem might also be motivating and provide them with insights into how one can resolve a problem and come closer to one's goals. In the light of the arguments presented above, we propose:

*H1: Coaching question focus will have an interactive effect with coachee's self-compassion on action-planning in such a way that solution-focus will lead to more effective action-planning as compared to problem-focus coaching questions, especially when self-compassion is low.*

#### *The Mediating Role of Mood*

People turn to coaching to stretch and develop current capacities and/or performance (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010), to develop new ways of seeing and behaving in problematic situations (Schein, 1969), to help them facilitate new ways of thinking and learning, and widen the range of perspectives and options (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2007). It is therefore not surprising that creativity is considered to play a significant role in achieving desired coaching outcomes (Kiel, Rimmer, Williams, & Doyle, 1996) placing it at the heart of the effective coaching (Phillips, 1994; Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011).

According to the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Emotions (Frederickson, 1998, 2001), positive emotions serve to broaden individuals' thought-action repertoires, hereby increasing the array of cognitions, ideas, and behavioral responses that come to mind in different situations. More specifically, positive emotions broaden habitual modes of thinking and acting by creating an urge to play, explore, push one's limits, be creative, envision future achievements, and take in new information and experiences (Frederickson, 2001). Baas, De Dreu and Nijstad's

(2008) meta-analysis covering 25 years of research linking mood to creativity supports this line of reasoning as they found that positive (activating) moods (e.g., happy, enthusiastic) are the most creativity-enhancing. Isen (2001) in her review paper also concluded how positive affect has a major influence on cognitive processing and related problem solving, cognitive flexibility, and innovative responding by facilitating elaboration, increased thinking about a wide range of related ideas, and openness to information.

Another theory/model put forth by De Dreu, Baas, and Nijstad (2008) for explaining the mood-creativity link that received empirical support is the Dual Pathway to Creativity Model. According to their model, both positive and negative activating moods promote creativity, but through two distinct pathways: positive activating moods through enhancing cognitive flexibility, and negative activating moods through enhancing persistence. However, there is also evidence that negative emotions increase effort and subsequent performance only on the easy tasks, while causing disengagement on objectively difficulty tasks (Gendolla & Krüsken, 2001, 2002). As coachees turn to coaching to help them develop action plans for solving their problems and for making the needed changes (Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999), this in itself implies the difficulty of issues and problems that the coachees are dealing with. Hence, we propose that only positive (activating) mood will have beneficial effects on coachees' action-planning by fostering creativity and enabling more effective solution construction.

We predict that because both coaching question focus and self-compassion exert influence on mood, that it is the combination of the two that will determine the degree of positive (activating) mood, and in turn affect the effectiveness of action-planning process (see Figure 1). Solution-focus coaching questions, where the

emphasis is on one's resilience, strengths, and resources (Grant, 2011), cause an increase in positive and decrease in negative affect (Grant, 2012; Grant & O'Connor, 2010). In contrast, problem-focus coaching questions emphasize the problem and the surrounding (negative) emotions, and direct self-focus towards the negative aspects of the self, which leads to an increase in negative affectivity (for a review, see Mor & Winquist, 2002; Theeboom, 2013). As such, problem-focus will have especially damaging affective consequences for those with low self-compassion as those individuals become easily overwhelmed with painful feelings making it very hard to maintain a balanced awareness of their emotions (Neff, 2003a). This, in turn, results in a full immersion in their subjective emotional reactions making it difficult to adopt a more objective perspective (Bennett-Goleman, 2001; as cited in Neff, 2003a). Combined with their inclinations for rumination (Raes, 2010), depression, and anxiety (Neff, 2003a), a problem-focused coaching approach will only amplify those tendencies by making their problems and failures even more salient, causing an increase in negative, and decrease in positive mood and, and in turn, hinder their action-planning ability.

High self-compassion, on the other hand, can serve as a buffer against these negative affective consequences of the problem-focus, enabling effective action-planning even under the condition of problem exploration. Self-compassionate individuals are able to hold their emotions in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them (Neff, 2003a) even when they are thinking about past negative life events or humiliating situations (Leary, et al., 2007). This ability to skillfully regulate their negative emotions is not surprising as positive relationships were established between self-compassion and emotional intelligence (Neff, 2003a), and self-compassion and emotion-focused coping strategies of acceptance (Neff, Hsieh, &

Dejitterat, 2005). In addition, they generally experience more positive affect, happiness, and optimism (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007), and are able to transform their negative moods into more positive affective states allowing a clearer apprehension of their immediate situation (Neff, 2003a, 2003b). We therefore propose:

*H2: Positive (activating) mood will mediate the interactive effects of coaching question focus and self-compassion on action-planning.*

#### *The Mediating Role of Attention*

If action-planning is to be successful, coachees must intentionally direct their attention to problem-solving. However, attention is a scarce resource (Simon, 1981; Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2010) that is often steered away from the task-relevant information (Hillstrom & Chai, 2006). As such, directing attention towards the relevant content takes a great deal of effort (Kaplan & Berman, 2010; Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007). We propose that the amount of effort coachees need to exert in directing their attention to problem-solving, and consequent effectiveness of the action-planning, will depend on both coaching question focus (problem- vs. solution-focus) and the level of coachees' self-compassion (low vs. high).

Solution-focused coaching entails asking questions that can help identify possible solutions to the problem by emphasizing the importance of the solution construction (McKergow & Korman, 2009; Grant, 2003). For instance, a coach would ask: "Think about a possible solution to the problem you have just described, and describe some ways you could start to move towards creating this solution" (Grant, 2012; p.26). That is, through the solution-focused approach, coachees' attention is being directed towards the possible solutions (Grant, 2012), which can help facilitate the effectiveness of action-planning efforts of both those with low and high self-

compassion.

In contrast to solution-focus, the goal of the problem-focused coaching approach is to uncover the aetiology of the problem (McKergow & Korman, 2009) where the coach is asking questions such as: "How long has this been a problem and how did it start? What are your thoughts about this problem?" (Grant, 2012; p.26). By posing this type of questions, the coach is steering coachees' attention specifically towards the problem, rather than the solution (Grant, 2012). As a consequence, when coachees are trying to come up with solutions to their problem during action-planning, they will have to exert effort in order to direct their attention away from the problem and towards the solution.

I predict that the ease and the success with which coachees are able to exert that effort will depend on their level of self-compassion. When self-compassion is low, one's attentional capacity is already occupied by rumination (Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996; Kuhl & Helle, 1986; Mikulincer, 1989) and generalization of negative events to self-attitudes (Leary, et al., 2007). This will make it difficult for them to "let go" of the problem-focused self-reflective process and re-direct attention towards solution construction, which will, in turn, decrease the effectiveness of action planning.

On the other hand, when self-compassion is high, people have a mindful perspective that allows them to think about their problem in a more balanced way, and with a clearer apprehension of the immediate situation (Neff, 2003a), without amplifying and perpetuating own experiences of pain and failure (Blatt, Quinlan, Chevron, McDonald, & Zuroff, 1982). As such, mindfulness helps maintain attention to the current moment and the task at hand (e.g., action-planning) by minimizing the processing of irrelevant and intrusive thoughts that drain attentional resources (Ortner,

et al., 2007; Lewis & Inder, 1997). Evidence showing how mindfulness enhances attentional processes is mounting (e.g., Carter et al., 2005; Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007; Slagter et al., 2007; Slagter, Lutz, Greischar, Nieuwenhuis, & Davidson, 2009). Additionally, it has been demonstrated that self-compassion positively relates to curiosity and exploration (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007) that promote allocation of attentional resources to recognizing and pursuing novel and challenging experiences (Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004), which can aid the construction of novel solutions during the action-planning. We therefore propose that even after a problem-focused coaching intervention, those with high self-compassion will be able "let go" of the problem-focused thinking with more ease and less effort and successfully re-direct their attention towards the solution construction during the action-planning. Hence, we propose:

*H3: Focused attention will mediate the interactive effects of coaching question focus and self-compassion on action-planning.<sup>1</sup>*

*Self-Compassion, Coaching Question Focus, and the Coachees' Perceptions of Personal Growth Initiative*

We have already mentioned how coachees might express their own wishes or preferences about the content of their coaching conversations. For instance, they might feel that exploring their problem will help them move closer towards their goal (Grant & O'Connor, 2010, p.109). Often, coaches do adjust the coaching

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<sup>1</sup> Another possibility is that mood and attention might operate sequentially in its effects on action-planning. According to the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Emotions, positive emotions broaden, while negative emotions narrow the scope of attention (Frederickson & Branigan, 2005). It is therefore quite possible that the mood resulting from the interactive effects of coaching question focus and self-compassion will determine the degree of focused attention, which will, in turn, affect the action-planning (see Figure 2). If we discover significant interactive effects of coaching question focus and self-compassion on positive (activating) mood as proposed in our hypothesis H2, we will continue by testing this alternative model in our exploratory analysis.

conversations to meet their client's wishes, in order to avoid alienating them (Grant & O'Connor, 2010). But do the coachees truly know from what coaching approach they are to benefit the most? Does their idea of what "works for them best" actually help them achieve the desired change?

So far we have looked at how different coaching approaches (problem- versus solution-focus) can affect the *actual* ability of coachees with low versus high self-compassion to develop action-plans for achieving the desired change. To answer the question posed above, in our exploratory analysis we will take a look at how interactive effects of different coaching approaches (problem- versus solution-focus) and self-compassion (low versus high) affect coachees' *perceptions* of their ability for self-improvement (i.e., Personal growth initiative, Robitschek et al., 2012). The self-reported measure of personal growth initiative is ideal for this purpose as it captures the developmental components that can be changed through intervention, rather than relatively stable personality traits (Weigold, Porfeli, & Weigold, 2013). That is, coachees' self-improvement perceptions will be open to the influence of the interactive effects of coaching question focus and self-compassion, allowing us to compare the degree of correspondence between the actual (i.e., action-planning) and the perceived self-improvement skills.

To make it clear, we are not arguing that coaches should altogether dismiss their clients' wishes and preferences, but rather that if the degree of correspondence between the actual and the perceived self-improvement skills is found to be low, that they should be careful in following their coachees' lead during the coaching conversations.

## Method

### *Sample.*

A total of 118 students (83 females, 112 Dutch) from a Dutch university (54 psychology students) participated in the study for course credit or monetary compensation (€10, approximately \$12 U.S.). Participants' mean age was 21.44 years ( $SD = 3.35$ ). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions of a 2 (coaching questions focus: solution- vs. problem-focus) X 2 (self-compassion: low vs. high) factorial design. The dependent variables were action-planning (measured as fluency, flexibility, and elaboration), positive (activating) mood, and focused attention. In our exploratory analysis we examined the effects of self-compassion and coaching question focus on personal growth initiative.

### *Procedure and Manipulations.*

Participants responded to an advertisement which asked students who are experiencing study-related stress to take part in a "free coaching session". Upon arrival to the lab, participants read an information brochure and signed an informed consent form. The experimenter explained that they would be answering a series of questions on the computer, a type of questions that a coach would ask them during a coaching session. Participants worked individually on computer terminals displaying all the instructions and tasks, and recording all the responses. In the beginning of the experiment participants provided their demographical data and their current mood was assessed (i.e., baseline mood measure). All the participants have shortly described their study-related problem that they would like to solve, how they were suffering from that problem, and how serious the problem was.

Next, we manipulated self-compassion following Baker and McNulty's (2011) procedure for manipulating self-compassion. Participants were randomly assigned to

imagine responding to their problem with self-compassion (i.e., high self-compassion) or with self-criticism (i.e., low self-compassion). In the high self-compassion condition, participants were asked to list the thoughts that would lead them to agree with three positively scored items from the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003a), covering each of the three subscales of the SCS. These items were: a) "How would you keep your problem in perspective?" (i.e., Mindfulness), b) "How would you see your problem as part of the human condition (the type of problem all people make)?" (i.e., Common humanity), and c) "How would you be understanding and patient of your problem?" (i.e., Self-kindness). In the low self-compassion condition, participants were asked to list the thoughts that would lead them to agree with three negatively scored items from the SCS. These items were: a) "How would you become consumed by feelings of inadequacy because of this problem?" (i.e., Over-identification), b) "How would you feel like you are alone in having such a problem (that others would not have similar problems)?" (i.e., Isolation), and c) "How would you get down on yourself because of your problem?" (i.e., Self-judgment).

Following the self-compassion manipulation, participants were randomly assigned to the problem- or solution-focus condition where they received instructions and a series of questions adapted from Grant (2012) and Theeboom (2013) designed to elicit problem- or solution-focused thinking. In the problem-focus condition participants were asked to think about a situation in the past where their problem was very much present. Next, they had to describe what was the first thing that attracted their attention in that situation, how they behaved and felt, what thoughts they had, and how others around them would recognize that their problem was very much present. In the solution-focus condition participants were asked to imagine waking up one morning and noticing that their problem has "magically" disappeared or was

much less present. Next, they had to describe what was the first thing that attracted their attention when they woke up, how they behaved and felt, what thoughts they had, and how others around them would recognize the presence of that desired situation.

After the self-compassion and coaching question focus manipulations, participants' mood was assessed once again and they have completed the Stroop task, which measured their focused attention. Upon the completion of the Stroop task, participants were asked to come up action steps that can help them solve their problem (i.e., action-planning) and have completed the measure of personal growth initiative. Then, the participants answered the manipulation check questions (see, Figure 3). Finally, participants were debriefed, thanked, and given their compensation.

*Dependent measures.*

*Action-planning.* We measured the effectiveness of action-planning by assessing the action steps participants came up with that can help them solve their problem. In assessing the action steps we used three indicators of creative problem solving: fluency, flexibility, elaboration (Nijstad, De Dreu, Rietzschel, & Baas, 2010). Originality is another criterion that is often used for assessing creative problem solving. However, as meta-analytic findings indicated that originality is negatively related to feasibility (Nijstad, et al., 2010) and since the purpose of the action-planning within the context of coaching is discovering solutions that can be readily applied in "real-life" situations, we did not consider originality to be relevant criterion of the action-planning effectiveness.

*a) Fluency.* As fluency refers to the sheer quantity of generated ideas (i.e., production; Guilford, 1967; Torrance, 1969), we measured action-planning fluency as

the total number of generated action steps. The higher number of action steps indicated more action-planning fluency.

*b) Flexibility.* Flexibility refers to the production of different ideational categories (Guilford, 1967) reflecting one's capacity to switch amongst different approaches, sets, and goals (Baas et al., 2008). Therefore, we measured action-planning flexibility as the number of different conceptual categories participants used when generating action-steps (i.e., the number of unique action-steps). All action-steps were coded into four problem focused and four emotion focused coping strategies. These eight coping strategies are often used within the student population and were distinguished by Struthers, Perry, and Menec (2000), and based largely on Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub's (1989) dispositional COPE scale. Problem focused coping categories included: academic planning (e.g., "I make a plan of action"), general active coping (e.g., "I set my priorities straight"), efficacy (e.g., "I try to motivate myself"), and active study coping (e.g., "I will try using a different study technique"). Emotion focused coping categories included: general emotional support (e.g., "I discuss my feelings with someone"), denial or distancing (e.g., "I act as though it hasn't happened"), emotional venting (e.g., "I get upset and I let my emotions out"), and academic disengagement (e.g., "I give up trying to reach my goal"). When looking into the content of participants' action-steps we discovered an additional reoccurring coping strategy, which we called physical- or health-related coping. This type of coping included actions-steps such as "I need to sleep more", "I need to eat healthier", or "I should exercise more". Two independent raters, blind to the experimental conditions coded the first 160 action-steps with an inter-rater agreement of  $\kappa = .80$ . As this level of inter-rater agreement is considered to be substantial (Landis & Koch, 1977), a single rater coded the remaining action-steps.

The higher the number of categories participants used, the greater the action-planning flexibility (e.g., Nijstad, Stroebe, & Lodewijk, 2002, 2003).

*c) Elaboration.* Elaboration refers to the amount of detail in which the solution is described (Nijstad, et al., 2010), and was measured as the number of words participants used when describing their action steps divided by the number of action steps (Glover & Gary, 1976). The more words participants used when describing their action-steps indicated more action-planning elaboration.

*Positive (activating) mood.* Mood was measured with the UWIST Mood Adjective Checklist (UMACL, Matthews, Jones, & Chamberlain, 1990) consisting of 24 mood adjectives. The UWIST Mood Adjective Checklist is appropriate for the purposes of the current study as it captures valence and activation components of mood, both of which are shown to influence creative problem solving (Baas, et al., 2008). Participants indicated their current mood by rating the adjectives by intensity on a scale from 1 to 7. Positive (activating) mood was measured by the energetic arousal scale (e.g., energetic, alert, sluggish (last item reverse coded)) where higher scores indicated more positive (activating) mood. This scale exhibited a sufficient reliability: baseline  $\alpha = .77$ , and post-measure  $\alpha = .87$ .

*Focused attention.* To measure participants' capacity for attentional self-regulation (i.e., focused or selective attention; Lezak, 2004) we used the color-word Stroop task (Stroop, 1935). During this task participants responded to colored letter strings. Letter strings were color words (e.g., "red", "blue") and participants were to inhibit the predominant tendency to read color words, but instead respond to the color of the ink by pressing a letter "A" or letter "L" on the keyboard. In addition, participants were instructed to respond as quickly and as accurately as possible. Trials were presented successively and in a different random order for each participant

(Jostmann & Koole, 2007), starting with 12 practice trials during which they were provided with the performance feedback. The actual experimental trials consisted of 24 congruent (e.g., "red" in red, "blue" in blue), 24 incongruent (e.g., "red" in blue, "blue" in red), and 24 filler (e.g., "red" in blue, with response inks in black and blue) trials. The computer unobtrusively recorded participants' response latencies and errors. Focused attention was measured by a Stroop interference index for response latencies, calculated by subtracting average response latencies on congruent trials from response latencies on incongruent trials (Jostmann & Koole, 2007). Stroop interference in errors was calculated by subtracting the number of errors on congruent trials from the errors on incongruent trials (Jostmann & Koole, 2007). For both Stroop interference scores, higher scores indicated more Stroop interference (i.e., less focused attention).

*Personal growth initiative.* Personal growth initiative was assessed with the Personal Growth Initiative Scale–II (Robitschek et al., 2012), a 16-item measure designed to capture one's set of skills for self-improvement. Participants indicated their agreement with each of the items (e.g., "I know steps I can take to make intentional changes in myself.") on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 6 ("strongly agree"). Mean scores were computed, with higher scores indicating higher levels of personal growth initiative. This scale exhibited sufficient reliability ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

*Manipulation checks.*

*Coaching question focus.* We used four items to check the adequacy of our coaching question focus manipulation. Participants indicated their level of agreement with each of the items on 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("fully disagree") to 7 ("fully agree"). Example items were: "In this study I was asked to think about a

positive situation" (i.e., solution-focus); "In this study I was asked to think about a situation in which my problem was very much present" (i.e., problem-focus; reverse-coded). Higher scores on this 4-item scale indicated higher solution-focus, and lower scores indicated lower solution-focus (i.e., problem-focus). Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .85.

*Self-compassion.* To determine whether our self-compassion manipulation led participants to be more vs. less self-compassionate, we adjusted and administered the same six items from the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a) we used in the self-compassion manipulation (e.g., "While participating in this study I kept my problem in perspective." (i.e., high self-compassion); "While participating in this study I was consumed by feelings of inadequacy because of my problem" (i.e., low self-compassion; reverse-coded). Two additional items were: "In this study I was asked to imagine reacting to my problem in a self-compassionate way" and "In this study I was asked to imagine reacting to my problem in a self-critical way" (reverse-coded). Participants indicated their level of agreement with each of the items on 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("fully disagree") to 7 ("fully agree"). Higher scores on this 8-item scale indicated higher self-compassion, and lower scores indicated higher self-criticism (i.e., lower self-compassion). These items demonstrated acceptable internal consistency with Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ .

## Results

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## Discussion

Over the past decade, coaching has become a mainstream tool for individual and organizational development (Grant et al., 2010). And while we know that coaching is effective (for a meta-analysis, see Theeboom, et al., 2013), the possibility that the degree of effectiveness of different coaching approaches might depend on coachees' individual resources has not yet been explored. Addressing this issue, we proposed that coachees' level of self-compassion plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of solution- vs. problem focused coaching approaches. We proposed that the solution-focus would lead to more effective action-planning as compared to problem-focus coaching questions, especially when coachees' self-compassion is low. Put differently, we expected that coachees' with high self-compassion would benefit from both solution- and problem-focused coaching, while those with low self-compassion would benefit more from solution- than the problem-focused coaching. Our main analysis provided no support for this proposition as no significant interaction was found between coaching question focus (problem- vs. solution-focus) and self-compassion (low vs. high) on any of the indicators of action-planning effectiveness (i.e., fluency, flexibility, and elaboration). Consequently, our predictions regarding the role of positive (activating) mood and focused attention as underlying mechanisms for explaining the interactive effects of coaching question focus and self-compassion on action-planning were also not supported.

However, we did find a marginally significant main effect of coaching question focus on action-planning fluency indicating that problem-focus lead participants to come up with slightly more action-steps for solving their problem than the solution-focus. This finding is not in line with our theorizing, as we generally expected that solution-focused coaching questions would lead to more effective

action-planning as compared to problem-focused coaching questions. It is also not in line with Grant's (2012) finding that solution-focused approach lead participates to generate significantly more action steps that the problem-focused approach. The Dual Pathway to Creativity Model (De Dreu, et al., 2008) might account for this observed pattern. According to this model negative (activating) moods increase fluency through enhanced persistence and perseverance. In our study, problem-focus caused a significant increase in negative (activating) mood as indicated by the Tense arousal scale (see Table 1). The increase in negative (activating) mood informs the individual that the situation is problematic and that the action must be taken to rectify the current situation (as cited in De Dreu, et al., 2008) enhancing one's persistence and perseverance and hereby increasing the action-planning fluency. This reasoning is supported as negative (activating) mood indeed mediated the relationship between coaching question focus and action-planning fluency (see Table 5). However, we should point out that the observed mediation effects were very small (i.e., marginally significant) and should be interpreted with caution. We did not expect to observe this negative (activating) mood – persistence – increased flexibility pathway in the context of coaching as we assumed high difficulty of the coachees' problem and based on the evidence that negative emotions cause disengagement on objectively difficulty tasks (Gendolla & Krusken, 2001, 2002). However, it is quite possible that the difficulty in dealing with the problem was lower in our study than it usually is in the context of "real-life" coaching. The student population used for testing our predictions might have had a different motivation for taking part in the study on coaching, such as payment incentive, rather than the need for help in solving their problem.

Another unexpected finding was that those with low self-compassion used more different categories when generating action-steps (i.e., more action-planning

flexibility) that those with high self-compassion. This contradicts previous findings relating self-compassion with increased creativity (Zabelina & Robinson, 2010) and cognitive flexibility (Martin, Staggers, & Anderson, 2011). One reason that could account for this observed pattern as well as for the lack of support for our predictions is the fact that the self-compassion manipulation was not as successful as initially indicated by our manipulation check. More specifically, only the manipulation of low self-compassion did not work as intended: 53% of the participants in the low self-compassion condition actually indicated having a higher (or equal) level of self-compassion than self-criticisms (i.e., low self-compassion). This finding is in itself very interesting as it provides us with the answer to the question we previously posed: "To what extent can self-compassion be induced within the context of coaching?" While the lack of success in inducing critical self-attitude (i.e., low self-compassion) made it more difficult to test our predictions with accuracy, it fills us with optimism as it shows how people are much easier brought into a positive self-compassionate rather than into a negative self-critical mindset. This finding provides further support for the claim that self-compassion is a "trainable" resource (e.g., Baker & McNulty, 2011; Kelly, et al., 2010; Adams & Leary, 2007; Leary, et al., 2007; Gilbert, 2005, 2009; Neff & Germer, 2013) rather than a stable trait, and that even a short intervention such as ours can be successful in cultivating a self-compassionate mindset.

But why was it so difficult to induce a critical self-attitude (i.e., low self-compassion)? The answer might lie in the widely accepted claim that humans are motivated to defend, maintain and maximize positive self-evaluations (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003; Rogers, 1959). At the very core of the Rogers's (1951) phenomenological theory is the idea that humans have a basic need to maintain and

enhance the self. Carver and Scheier's (1981) hierarchy of standards for self-regulation as well as Tesser's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance model posit that people have the superordinate goal of maintain the positive self-views and that they behave in ways that help them maintain positive self-evaluations (as cited in Heine et al., 1999). Finally, Hobfoll (1989) in his conservation of resources model pointed out that people strive to acquire and maintain resources in order to protect and enhance the self. When we take this protective, self-enhancing mechanism into account, it is not surprising that our participants resisted feeling inadequate or isolated because of their problem (i.e., low self-compassion) but have much more readily responded when asked to put their problem in perspective, see it as a part of human condition, and be understating an patient of their problem (i.e., high self-compassion).

The only purpose of low-self compassion induction was to allow us the comparison and causal conclusions about the differential effect of different coaching approaches (problem- vs. solution-focus) for those with low vs. high self-compassion on their action-planning effectiveness. For this reason we decided to put our predictions to the test once again, but within the sample in which our manipulations were successful. The results revealed that self-compassion moderates the effects of coaching question focus on action-planning fluency, such that both those with high and low self-compassion benefited equally from solution focused coaching questions, while only those with high self-compassion benefited from the problem-focus as indicated by the number of generated action-steps. That is, those with low self-compassion generated significantly less action steps under problem-focus than those with low self-compassion (see Figure 4). The results are therefore largely consistent with our predictions, especially regarding the importance of self-compassion under problem exploration. However, the benefits of high self-compassion for the

effectiveness of coaching even exceeded our expectation, as high self-compassion not only buffered against the negative consequences of problem-focus but also served to draw some benefits from the problem exploration. This suggests, somewhat paradoxically, that if coachees extend kindness to themselves, are accepting of their failures, and see them as a part of being human that they will be more inclined to actively try to solve their problems. Our results, therefore, disprove Baker and McNulty's (2011) concern that self compassion might undermine motivation to correct mistakes and increase complacency, but rather, support Neff 's (2003b; p.87) assumption that genuine feelings of self compassion do not lead to passivity, but instead enable one to recognize, confront, and rectify one's failings.

At this point, we can only speculate about the reasons why we observed these patterns, as this exploratory analysis, like our original analysis on the full sample, also failed to support for the mediating role of positive (activating) mood and focused attention. It does seem that when self-compassionate individuals are confronted with their problem, a sense of urgency to rectify their situation is adaptive rather than debilitating, and that the opposite can be said for those with lower self-compassion. To better understand the mechanisms behind this role self-compassion plays in facilitating coaching effectiveness we turn to implicit theories people hold about the malleability of their personal attributes (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995). On the one hand, people might believe that some aspects of the self such as intelligence, morality, or personal weaknesses are fixed and immutable trait-like entities (i.e., entity theory). On the other hand, and in contrast, people may believe that their attributes are malleable, and can be changed and developed (i.e., incremental theory; Dweck et al., 1995; p. 267). As such, incremental beliefs can also be seen as personal resources that enables responding to failures by adopting learning goals and by striving for self-

improvement, hereby facilitating growth-related behaviors (Breines & Chen, 2012; Diener & Dweck, 1978, 1980; Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Rhodewalt, 1994; Robins & Pals, 2002). As the goal of coaching is to promote coachees' development (Downey, 2003), it is safe to assume that coachees who hold incremental beliefs will be more open and more responsive to the coach's attempts to facilitate positive change.

Breines and Chen (2012) have demonstrated that self-compassionate individuals tend to hold incremental beliefs and to see their weakness as more changeable. This mindset can encourage them to tackle their problem head on, and respond in constructive ways, as they did in our study. However, when individuals have low levels of self-compassion and see their weakness as fixed and immutable, forcing them to confront their problem can be threatening and hinder goal progress. Perhaps, this is why in our study those with low levels of self-compassion responded better to the solution-focused, rather than to the problem-focused coaching approach.

Further, our exploratory analysis within the restricted sample revealed that coaching question focus affects coachees' perceptions of their skills for self-improvement (i.e., personal growth initiative). Under problem-focus, coachees perceived their self-improvement skills to be higher than under solution-focus. As in this sample, the coaching question focus had no effects on their actual self-improvement ability as indicated by action planning fluency, flexibility, and elaboration, this implies that the coachees idea of what "works best" for them seems to be misguided. Even though coachees might experience problem exploration as cathartic and helpful (Grant & O'Connor, 2010) leading them to believe that problem-focused coaching approach is effective, it might not translate into an actual change.

Additionally, the way in which problem- vs. solution focus approach influences coachees' perceptions of their skills for self-improvement depends on their

level of self-compassion. While for those with high self-compassion, coaching question focus had no differential effects, those with low self-compassion perceived their skills for self-improvement to be much higher under problem- than under solution-focus (see Figure 5). That is, for the coachees with low self-compassion the perceptions of their self-improvement skill were in the opposite direction of their actual self-improved ability (i.e., action-planning). This discrepancy was much smaller for those with high self-compassion, as in terms of their actual self-improvement ability they benefited slightly more from the problem- than from solution-focused approach.

As mentioned earlier, self-compassion is a "powerful motivating force for growth and change" that provides emotional safety to explore one's maladaptive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Neff, 2003b; p.87). This makes it easy to understand why self-compassionate individuals perceived that they would benefit equally from both problem- and solution focused coaching approaches in terms of their self-improvement skills. However, the large discrepancy between the actual and the perceived self-improvement skills for those with low self-compassion is much harder to understand. If anything, one would expect that they would perceive solution-focus as more beneficial since self-critical individuals do not have the emotional safety to freely explore their problems, and often use protective mechanism such as screening out the inadequacies from self-awareness (Neff, 2003b). On theoretical approach that might help account for this finding is the Self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 1987, 1990). This theory assumes that people strive to confirm self-conceptions in order to increase their perceptions of control and prediction (e.g., Heider, 1958; Rodin, 1986). They do this by using various strategies (for review, see Swann, 1990), such as for example interacting with others who confirm their self-

views, by seeking, paying more attention, and having a better recall of the self-confirmatory feedback (as cited in Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992). Moreover, people with negative self-views prefer negative over positive feedback even though they might not enjoy it (Swann et al., 1992). By the same token, those with low self-compassion might prefer problem- to solution-focused coaching. As people with low self-compassion tend to be absorbed with their inadequacies by amplifying their pain and failures (Neff, 2003a), problem-focused coaching approach might serve to verify those negative self-attitudes and provide them with the sense of control and predictability. In contrast, the solution-focused coaching approach with its emphasis on one's strengths and resources, and focus on what's going right (Grant, 2012) might increase uncertainties about their self-views hereby decreasing their perceptions of control and predictability. At first glance this explanation is at odds with our reasoning behind the difficulty in inducing a critical self-attitude, according to which all people are motivated to maintain or maximize positive self-evaluations (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003; Rogers, 1959). However, people with negative self-attitudes also desire enhancing appraisals (Swann et al., 1989), but when self-verification and self-enhancement motives clash, self-verification will prevail especially when their self-views are firmly held (Swann, 1990). The fact that for them our low self-compassion manipulations was successful might indicate that they already held firm critical self-attitudes, as their self-verification prevailed over their self-enhancement motive. This line of reason seems to hold as those in the low self-compassion condition that were receptive to our manipulation indeed had significantly lower levels of self-compassion ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = .65$ ) as indicated by their Self-Compassion Scale score (SCS; Neff, 2003a) than those for whom our low self-compassion manipulation did not work ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = .80$ ),  $t(49) = 2.75$ ,  $p < .01$ .

However, we should point out that these SCS scores were measured at the very end of our experiment (i.e., after the self compassion manipulation), so we should interpret this finding with caution. In the future, including a baseline measure of self-compassion would be more informative and allow us more certainty when drawing conclusions.

### *Theoretical Implications*

To date, there is very little insight into what is happening during the coaching process and what mechanisms are linking coaching to coaching outcomes. In the current study, we have set out to shed some light on this issue by asking how, why and for whom different coaching approaches might work. By taking a resource-based approach to coaching (Theeboom, Beersma & Van Vianen, 2014), we have shown that the personal resource of self-compassion facilitates coaching effectiveness. That is, when coachees have the resource of self-compassion, the previously demonstrated superiority of solution- over problem-focused coaching (e.g., Grant, 2012; Grant & O'Connor, 2010; Wehr, 2010) seems to disappear. This means that self-compassion as a personal resource allows coachees to draw benefits from both the problem- and solution-focused coaching, while in its absence the benefits are limited to the solution-focused coaching.

Unfortunately, we weren't able to answer the question 'Why' this effect occurs as positive (activating) mood and focused attention did not mediate the interactive effects of coaching question focus and self-compassion on action-planning. However, moderator variables (i.e., self-compassion) are often useful for elucidating mediating process (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The discovery that self-compassion facilitates coaching effectiveness also informs us that there is something inherent to this resource that helps translate coaching interventions into successful outcomes. It is

possible that the incremental beliefs (Breines & Chen, 2012), high intrinsic motivation and the adaptation of mastery goals, or less fear of failure (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejjitterat, 2005) characteristic for those with high self-compassion are the processes linking coaching interventions to coaching outcomes. Further, the fact that when this resource was absent, the only coaching approach that was effective was the one that focuses on building one's resources (i.e., solution-focused coaching) makes us that more confident that personal resources such as self-compassion are important for answering the question 'How' coaching works.

Our finding lends support to Theeboom et al.'s (2014) recent theorizing about the importance of resources for the coaching process. In their Adaptive Resources Coaching model, Theeboom et al. (2014) developed a perspective on coaching that focuses on building and strengthening peoples' adaptive resources that: a) "facilitate peoples' reactive or proactive adaptation to new demands and circumstances", and b) "can be influenced by coaching interventions" (p.3). Since not all resources are equally malleable (Van den Heuvel, Demerouti, Schaufeli, & Bakker, 2010), the challenge is now to specify all the adaptive resources on the right side of the fixed-malleable continuum that are relevant for achieving successful coaching outcomes. Theeboom et al. (2014) distinguished three categories of adaptive resources, namely self-concept (e.g., core self-evaluations, implicit personality theories), motivational (e.g., intrinsic and extrinsic goals, regulatory focus), and information processing resources (e.g., psychological flexibility, mindfulness). Self-compassion refers to the attitudes people hold about themselves during difficult times (Neff, 2003a), and can, as such, be classified as a self-concept resource. Further, through its positive relationship with intrinsic motivation and the adoption of mastery goals (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejjitterat, 2005), self-compassion can also be classified as a motivational resource.

Finally, as mindfulness is one of the three self-compassion components that helps regulate the focus of one's attention (Bishop et al., 2004), we can at the same time classify it an information-processing resources. This encompassing nature of self-compassion, together with the mounting evidence of its malleability makes it an especially interesting and relevant resource that can help coachees achieve desired changes and attain valuable outcomes. The synchrony with which self-compassion affects one's self-attitudes, motivation, and information processing also reflects Hobfoll's (2011) notion of the 'resource caravans' according to which different resources are "intimately related to one another developmentally and ecologically" (Hobfoll, 2012; p. 230). That is, resources are a part of a complex and dynamic system in which resources from one level (e.g., self-concept resources) interact with the resource from different levels (e.g., motivational resources; Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008). In that sense, the presence or absence of kind and accepting self-attitudes can determine one's motivational levels, that can, in turn, impact the degree to which one is able to successfully regulate attention and process information.

Another resource with such an encompassing nature that strengthens individuals' psychological immunity, and which might prove fruitful for illuminating coaching processes is Psychological capital (i.e., PsyCap; Luthans & Youssef, 2004; Luthans et al. 2007). PsyCap is "an individual's positive psychological state of development" characterized by: a) confidence in one's ability to take on and succeed at challenging tasks (i.e., self-efficacy); b) positive attributional style and expectations about the future (i.e., optimism); c) willpower and perseverance in goal-directed behaviors (i.e., hope); and d) capacity to 'bounce back' from adversity or failure (i.e., resilience; Luthans et al. 2007; p.3). Importantly, PsyCap is a state-like construct open to development, learning, and change (Luthans, Avey, & Patera, 2008;

Luthans, Avey, Avolio, & Peterson, 2010) and, as such, fulfills both of the requirements of Theeboom et al.'s (2014) adaptive resources definition. Taken altogether, it is hard not to see the potential benefits that PsyCap can have within the context of coaching, and yet this resource has been completely overlooked in the coaching literature.

The theoretical literature on coaching and the concomitant future research can, therefore, benefit from the more dynamic theoretical coaching models that can capture the complexity of the coaching process and explain how different coaching interventions translate into desired coaching outcomes. To quote Lewin (1952): "There is nothing more practical than a good theory" (p. 169), and thus acquiring this theoretical knowledge will allow us to fine-tune the existing coaching interventions, as well as to develop new ones.

#### *Practical Implications*

Our findings have several implications for coaches who have to decide what coaching approach they should use and with whom, and to what extent they should let their coachees drive this decision. First, coaches should take into account the level of their coachees' self-compassion. They should be aware that when using problem-focused coaching approach the only coachees that can benefit are those with high levels of self-compassion. Moreover, it seems that those with high levels of self-compassion can even benefit slightly more from the problem- than from solution-focus. On the other hand, using solution-focused approach seems to be a "safe bet", as this approach is shown to be beneficial for action-planning regardless of the coachees' self-compassion.

Second, we have also demonstrated that self-compassion is a "trainable" resource, and that even a short intervention can be sufficient to increase coachees'

self-compassion. This opens up a whole new door for coaches who can encourage and teach their clients to think about their problem with self-kindness and patience, to perceive their failures and inadequacies as a part of a larger human experience, and to hold their painful feelings and thoughts in a balanced awareness (Neff, 2003a). By cultivating and nurturing self-compassionate mindsets, coaches can without fear move between these two coaching perspectives (problem- and solution focused coaching approaches) to meet their clients' needs and to allow them to take the best out of all that coaching has to offer. To gain more insight into a different ways in which they can increase coachees' self-compassion, coaches can, for example, look at the Compassionate mind training (CMT; Gilbert & Proctor, 2006) that has been successful in decreasing self-criticism and increasing feeling of warmth and reassurance for the self. Another, more recent resource-building course called Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC; Neff & Germer, 2013) that is showing encouraging results in increasing self compassion might be another useful alternative for coaches who are attempting to nurture this valuable personal resource.

Third, our findings also indicated that coachees might not always know what coaching approach is best for them with regards to their action-planning. This is especially true for those with low self-compassion, for whom the discrepancy between the perceived and the actual self-improvement skills was the largest. Coaches should therefore not rely on coachees' idea of what works for them best, but should rather make a more informed decision when choosing what coaching questions they will be asking during their conversations. Even though coachees might feel how exploring their problem will help them move closer towards their goal, this approach might not translate into the actual goal-attainment. However, as denying the coachees opportunity to talk about and explore their problems might reduce rapport of even

alienate them (Grant, 2012), the best option is to first increase their self-compassion to make sure that the negative consequences of problem-focus on action-planning are avoided.

We have demonstrate that coachees' self-compassion plays a role not only in determining the effectiveness of problem- and solution-focused approaches, but also in determining how accurately they can judge which coaching approach will provide them with most benefits. To facilitate effective coaching, we suggest to coaches to assess the levels of their client's self-compassion at the onset of each coaching engagement. A validated 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003a) offers a quick and easy way for coaches to gain insight into their coachees' levels of self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. What's more, there is also an economical alternative to the long SCS: a 12-item Self-Compassion Scale–Short Form that reduces the assessment time in half while retaining the same 3-factor structure as the original scale (SCS–SF; Raes, Pommier, Neff, & Van Gucht, 2011). From that point on, coaches can make an informed decision about what coaching approach they should predominantly use, and to what extent they can rely on their coachees' judgments about the direction they should take during their coaching conversations. If the coachee's self-compassion is low, but there is perhaps not enough time to cultivate a more self-compassionate mindset, using a solution-focused coaching will prove to be most beneficial. In that case, a coach should also avoid asking problem- focused questions that can have a debilitating effect on their action-planning ability. If the coachee's self-compassion is high, a coach should guide the conversations towards problem-focused talk, as problem exploration seems to motivate them to find different ways to rectify their problem.

Finally, given the difficulty in translating scientific literature into practice

(Nowack & Mashihhi, 2012) we urge: a) researcher to specify more explicitly how their empirical findings and theoretical conclusions can form a basis for coaching practices; and b) coaches to stay informed about the scientific developments within the coaching field, so that they can with combined efforts bridge the gap between the science and practice. If both researcher and coaches take on this important role, they can help create and sustain a science-practitioner driven discipline and elevate coaching to a more serious profession (Lowman, 2012).

#### *Limitations and Suggestions For Future Research*

Our study was the first to examine the implications of self-compassion for the effectiveness of different coaching approaches. As both coaching and self-compassion are relatively new research areas, there are still many unanswered questions. First of all, due to the cross-sectional nature of our experimental design we only looked at the immediate, but not long-term consequences of self-compassion and problem- vs. solution-focused coaching. The role of the coach is to facilitate the coachee's movement through the self-regulatory cycle towards goal-attainment (Grant, 2003). This process involves: a) helping coachees define and set their goal, b) developing a plan of action, c) implementation of those behaviors, and d) evaluating the success of those actions in terms of goal attainment. This is a systematic process that is being repeated until the coachee successfully attains the desired goal, implying a more long-term coach-coachee relationship. When assessing coaching effectiveness, the furthest we could get in this self-regulatory cycle with the current study design was action-planning. However, the clearest and most objective indication of the effective coaching is the coachees' goal attainment, an outcome that can only be captured by employing follow-up or longitudinal studies. Further, the use of longitudinal designs will also enable future researchers to examine how stable the observed increases in

self-compassion are and whether "self-compassion leads to sustained changes in behavior over time" (Breines & Chen, 2012; p. 1141). It might be the case that the increase in self-compassion we were able to create in the context of our experiment "wears off" after some time and that therefore, people return to their "baseline" self-compassion levels after the coaching session. This type of studies could provide further support to Neff and Germer's (2013) preliminary evidence showing that increases in self-compassion can be maintained relatively stable, and extend this finding to the coaching context. Another possibility is that self-compassion levels might be contingent upon the success of action plan for the goal attainment. After taking action, coachees must self-reflect on the new, implemented behaviors and evaluate if these actions were helpful in moving them closer to their goal (Grant, 2003). If these behaviors are judge to be unsuccessful, do the levels of self-compassion drop and discourage coachees from further adopting a self-compassioned mindset when facing failures? Even though we are optimistic that might not be the case as self-compassion was shown to be less contingent on the successful attainment of goals than self-esteem (Neff & Vonk, 2009), we still don't know to what degree will this hold in the context of coaching.

Second, the participants in our study were students dealing with study-related problems. Whereas homogeneity regarding the problems our participants dealt with was a prerequisite for adequate coding of the action planning data and allowed a more meaningful and internally valid between-subjects comparison of the obtained results (Wehr, 2012), in reality, coaching has much wider applications across a variety of contexts. For example, coaching is often used for improving leadership development and performance, increasing the levels of employee engagement, reducing attrition, or improving team work (ICF; 2013). In order to learn to what extent our findings are

generalizable, future studies should test our predictions within a different population that has different problems/goals.

One might also argue that the artificial setting in which our study was conducted might limit the degree to which we can draw conclusions from our findings. However, whereas the on-line coaching context and the absence of face-to-face coach-coachee interaction we employed has low ecological validity, the fact that we managed to observe some effects (which, after we excluded participants for whom the self-compassion manipulation failed, were largely consistent with our predictions), after such a short intervention and even without coachees experiencing an actual interaction (i.e., the absence of a holding environment; Winnicott, 1965) makes us confident that if anything, our found effects would have been even stronger in the "real-life" coaching context.

Another limitation concerns the small sample size on which we re-tested our predictions due to the difficulty in inducing low self-compassion. With a larger sample size we could detect smaller effects and produce more reliable correlational statistics (Cohen, 1992). To prevent the exclusion of such a large group of participants, future studies might manipulate only high self-compassion and compare this group to the control. With this design we would not be able to compare the effects of low vs. high self-compassion on different coaching approaches, but we would be able to test if an increase in self-compassion facilitates coaching effectiveness as compared to the neutral levels of self-compassion.

Another avenue for future research involves identifying mechanisms underpinning the effectiveness of different coaching approaches. Contrary to our expectations neither positive (activating) mood nor focused attention could explain the interactive effects of coaching question focus (problem- vs. solution) and self-

compassion (low vs. high) on action-planning. We have already mentioned in our discussion that perhaps coachees' incremental beliefs might explain why problem-focused coaching is so much more effective for those with high vs. low self-compassion. Another possibility is that different coaching approaches evoke different regulatory focus (i.e., prevention vs. promotion focus; Higgins, 1997, 1998), which might in turn determine the effectiveness of coachees' action-planning. Work by Friedman and Förster (2000, 2001, 2002) provides evidence that regulatory focus is related to creative performance. They found that promotion focus, as compared to prevention focus, promoted creative insight and divergent thinking. It is possible that the problem exploration (i.e., problem-focus) might evoke a prevention focus characterized by avoiding negative outcomes and failures, the use of vigilance means, such as being careful or avoiding mistakes (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 1997, 1998), and increased concerns with being precautionary and with following the rules (Florack & Hartmann, 2007; Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000). This might be especially the case for those with low self-compassion who are already inclined to focus on the negative and be overly self-critical. Their focus on avoiding negative outcomes and fear of making mistakes, might limit their action-planning ability especially when it comes to discovering new and yet untried solutions to their problem. On the other hand, solution-focus by emphasizing coachees' strengths and resources might evoke a promotion focus. Promotion-focused individuals aim to achieve positive outcomes, are concentrated on hopes, aspirations, and accomplishments, and use eagerness means to achieve success making them more inclined to engage in risky behaviors (Florack & Hartmann, 2007; Levine, et al., 2000). As such, a promotion focus might be helpful both for those with high and low self-compassion when trying to figure out new a ways that can help them solve their

problem.

Finally, it should also be noted how the same variable may function both as moderator or a mediator depending on the research question we are trying to answer (Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004). In the current study we have examined if the presence (absence) of the self-compassion (i.e., moderator) resource facilitates (attenuates) the effectiveness of different coaching interventions. We can also ask if certain coaching interventions are effective because they cause an increase in self-compassion (i.e., mediator). However, we cannot answer this question with the current study as self-compassion as a moderator was inherently unassociated with the coaching question focus assignment (Hinshaw, 2002). In the future, by assessing coachees' self-compassion after the coaching intervention, rather than manipulating it and treating as an independent variable, will allow to examine if self-compassion is one of the potential mechanism linking coaching to coaching outcomes. Discovering how and why different coaching approaches work is a worthwhile effort that can contribute to the scarce empirical and theoretical coaching literature (Feldman & Lankau, 2005) and "bring much needed rigor to the coaching arena" (Grant et al., 2010; p.3).

### *Conclusion*

At the beginning we have asked how coaches can determine what type of coaching questions they should ask and to whom in order to: a) best meet the needs of every coachee, and c) to maximize the benefits of coaching for each coachee? Taken together, we conclude that coaching can benefit from the resource-based approach and that the personal resource of self-compassion plays an important role in answering each of these questions. Facing problems and encountering roadblocks on the way to positive change can be scary and self-compassion can make this journey easier and more effective. Self-compassion aids psychological resiliency and well being, enables

growth, exploration, change, and wise understanding of oneself and others (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007; Neff, 2003b), all of which can not only aid the coaching process but represents what coaching is all about.

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Table 1.  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations ( $N = 118$ )

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Self-compassion (SC) <sup>a</sup>	.57	.49															
2. Coaching question focus (QF) <sup>b</sup>	.52	.50	-.12 <sup>‡</sup>														
3. Manipulation check SC	4.93	1.19	.72 <sup>**</sup>	-.09													
4. Manipulation check QF	3.82	1.97	-.08	.86 <sup>**</sup>	-.04												
5. Action steps fluency	6.37	2.58	-.11	-.13 <sup>‡</sup>	-.02	-.07											
6. Action steps flexibility	3.30	1.34	-.23 <sup>**</sup>	.01	-.23 <sup>**</sup>	.01	.54 <sup>**</sup>										
7. Action steps elaboration	7.22	3.81	.03	.09	-.02	.01	-.07	-.03									
8. Personal growth initiative	3.92	.73	-.07	-.13 <sup>‡</sup>	.04	-.13 <sup>‡</sup>	.03	.05	.10								
9. Tense arousal baseline	3.02	1.02	-.21 <sup>**</sup>	.06	-.34 <sup>**</sup>	.01	.14 <sup>‡</sup>	.21 <sup>*</sup>	-.15 <sup>*</sup>	-.12							
10. Energetic arousal baseline	4.34	.84	.06	-.01	.15 <sup>‡</sup>	.05	.21 <sup>*</sup>	.15 <sup>‡</sup>	.04	.21 <sup>*</sup>	-.34 <sup>**</sup>						
11. Hedonic tone baseline	5.13	.88	.05	-.11	.25 <sup>**</sup>	-.07	-.02	-.07	.05	.24 <sup>**</sup>	-.66 <sup>**</sup>	.59 <sup>**</sup>					
12. Tense arousal Time 2	3.50	1.29	-.14 <sup>‡</sup>	-.49 <sup>**</sup>	-.30 <sup>**</sup>	-.50 <sup>**</sup>	.18 <sup>*</sup>	.16 <sup>*</sup>	.03	-.02	.35 <sup>**</sup>	-.20 <sup>*</sup>	-.24 <sup>**</sup>				
13. Energetic arousal Time 2	4.39	1.21	-.09	.54 <sup>**</sup>	.04	.52 <sup>**</sup>	-.05	.01	.00	.07	-.12 <sup>‡</sup>	.28 <sup>**</sup>	.12 <sup>‡</sup>	-.70 <sup>**</sup>			
14. Hedonic tone Time 2	4.46	1.46	-.06	.61 <sup>**</sup>	.14 <sup>‡</sup>	.62 <sup>**</sup>	-.08	-.05	-.04	.09	-.16 <sup>*</sup>	.18 <sup>*</sup>	.17 <sup>*</sup>	-.81 <sup>**</sup>	.82 <sup>**</sup>		
15. Stroop response latency <sup>c</sup>	69.4	90.4	.08	-.08	.03	.02	-.02	.11	-.09	.00	-.01	.05	.08	.02	-.05	-.04	
16. Stroop errors <sup>d</sup>	1.03	2.09	-.00	-.07	-.06	.04	.03	.13 <sup>‡</sup>	-.03	-.01	-.02	.04	.06	-.08	.10	.10	.55 <sup>**</sup>

Note:  $N = 118$ , except for correlations involving Stroop response latencies and Stroop errors, where  $N = 49$ , due to a missing value for one of the participants.  
<sup>a</sup> Low self-compassion = 0, High self-compassion = 1. <sup>b</sup> Problem focus = 0, Solution focus = 1. <sup>c</sup> Stroop response latencies refer to the Stroop interference (SI) response latencies (SI = Incongruent – Congruent) and are reported in milliseconds (ms). <sup>d</sup> Stroop errors refer to the Stroop interference (SI) errors (SI = Incongruent – Congruent); <sup>‡</sup>  $p < .10$ , <sup>\*</sup>  $p < .05$ , <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < .01$ .

Table 2

*Number of Cases (N) Per Experimental Condition in the Restricted Sample*

Coaching question focus	Self-compassion condition		Total
	Low	High	
Problem-focus	10	34	44
Solution focus	12	30	42
Total	22	64	86

Table 3.

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Results of Mediation Analysis with Positive (Activating) Mood as a Mediator*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Positive (activating) mood Step 2					
Coaching question focus	1.38	.44	.58	3.14	29.4**
Self-compassion	.05	.37	.02	.13	
Coaching question focus X Self-compassion	-.14	.51	-.06	-.27	
Fluency Step 3					
Coaching question focus	1.50	1.23	.34	1.22	7.9
Self-compassion	1.96	.89	.39	2.19	
Coaching question focus X Self-compassion	-2.52	1.38	-.55	-1.82	
Positive (activating) mood	-.14	.57	-.07	-.24	
Self-compassion X Positive (activating) mood	.37	.63	.18	.59	
Step 4					
Positive (activating) mood	.17	.24	.09	.70	7.5
Coaching question focus	1.08	.99	.25	1.09	
Self-compassion	1.72	.79	.34	2.18	
Coaching question focus X Self-compassion	-2.02	1.09	-.44	-1.86	

‡  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 4.

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Results of Mediation Analysis with Focused Attention as a Mediator*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Focused attention Step 2					
Coaching question focus	-.05	.04	-.29	-1.35	2.4
Self-compassion	-.02	.03	-.10	-.62	
Coaching question focus X Self-compassion	.05	.04	.29	1.19	
Fluency Step 3					
Coaching question focus	1.29	1.02	.29	1.27	7.1
Self-compassion	1.72	.81	.34	2.12	
Coaching question focus X Self-compassion	-2.02	1.15	-.44	-1.75	
Focused attention	-.43	7.36	-.02	-.06	
Self-compassion X Focused attention	1.62	7.99	.06	.20	
Step 4					
Focused attention	.95	2.84	.04	.33	7.0
Coaching question focus	1.36	.95	.31	1.43	
Self-compassion	1.74	.79	.35	2.20	
Coaching question focus X Self-compassion	-2.09	1.09	-.45	-1.90	

‡  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 5.

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Results of Mediation Analysis with Tense Arousal as a Mediator*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Tense arousal Step 2					
Coaching question focus	4.15	.15	-.49	-5.99	23.6**
Fluency Step 3					
Tense arousal	.35	.18	.18	1.93	3.1*
Step 4					
Tense arousal	.30	.21	.15	1.41	3.4
Coaching question focus	-.30	.54	-.06	-.56	

‡  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Figure 1. Theoretical model

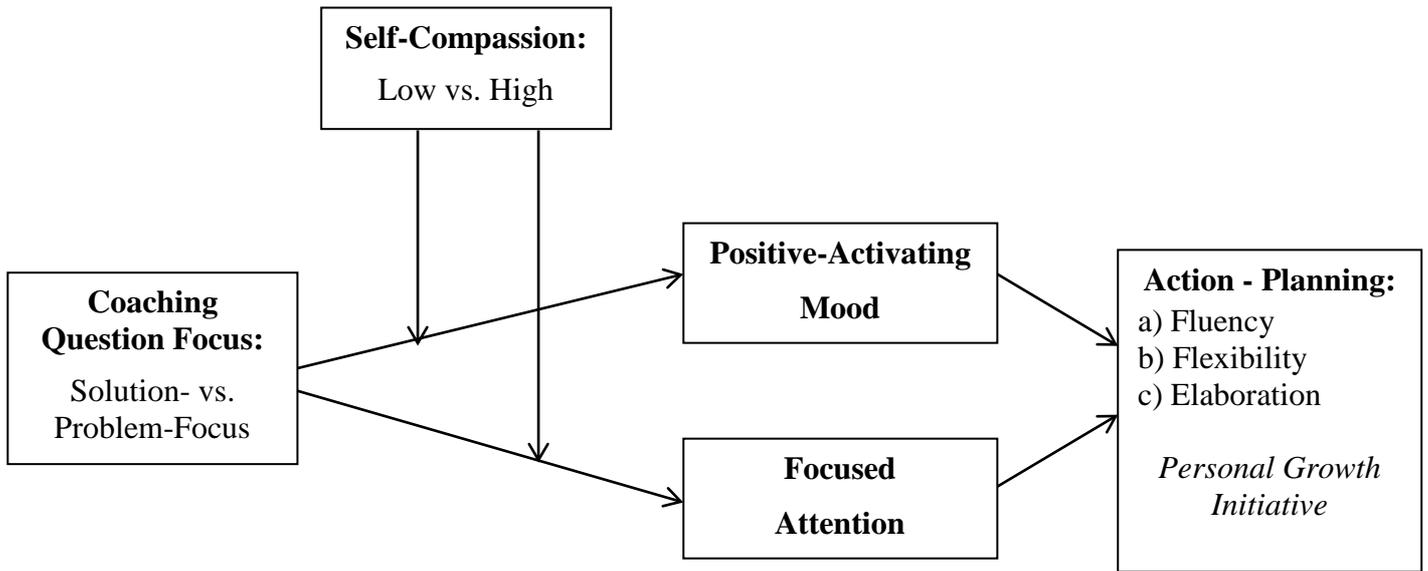


Figure 2. Alternative theoretical model

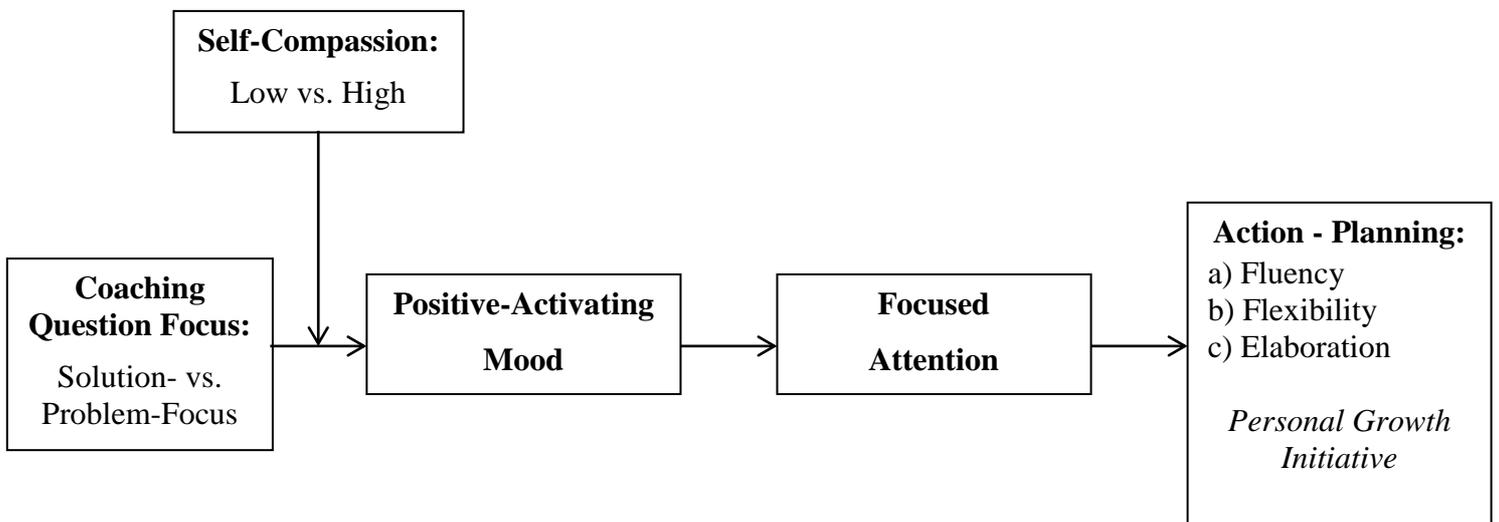


Figure 3. Overview of the procedure.

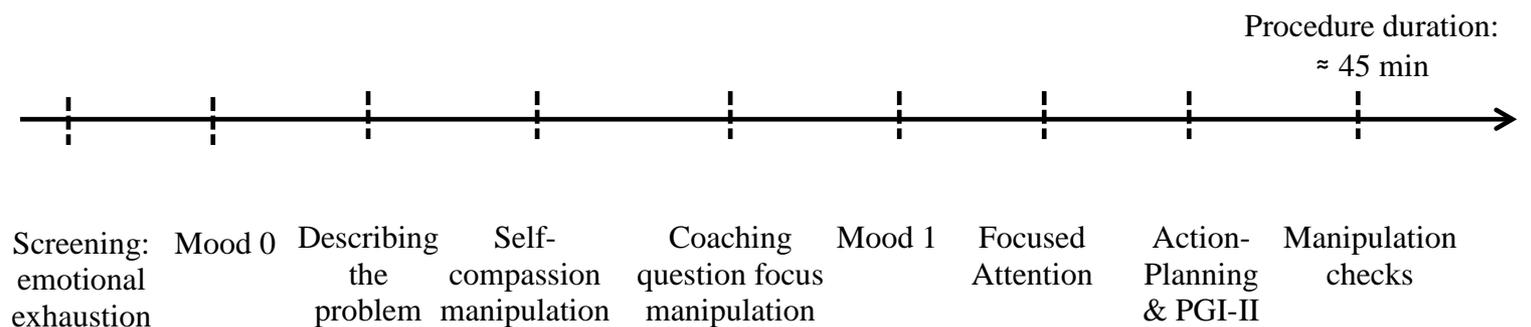


Figure 4. Action planning fluency as a function of coaching question focus (solution- vs. problem-focus) and coachee's self-compassion (low vs. high).

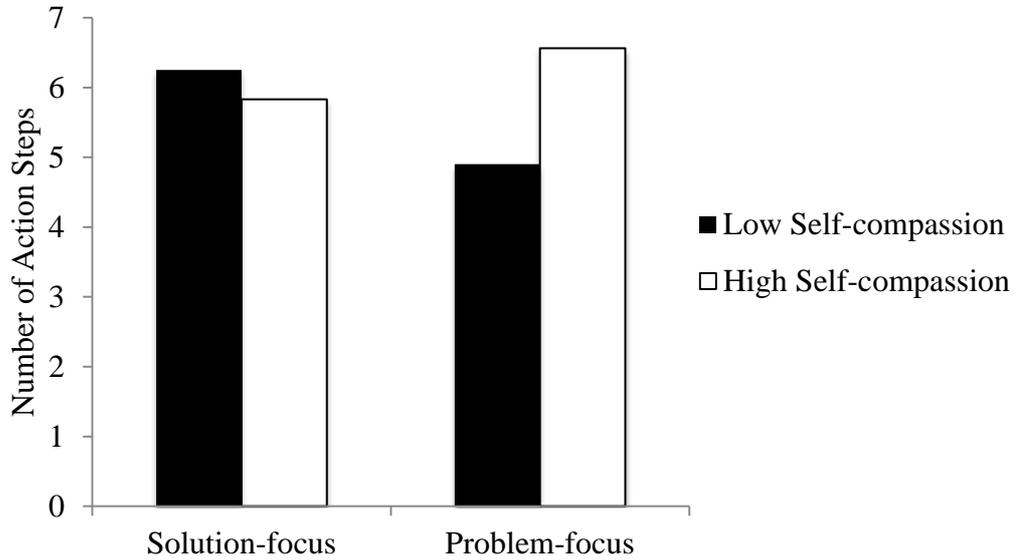


Figure 5. Personal growth initiative as a function of coaching question focus (solution- vs. problem-focus) and coachee's self-compassion (low vs. high).

