

Chapter 12

Structured Coaching Frameworks for Inclusive and Personalized Education: Empowering Neurodivergent Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the importance of empowering neurodivergent learners through coaching psychology, focusing on structured frameworks that promote inclusive and personalised education. Acknowledging the unique cognitive, emotional, and social profiles of autistic individuals, ADHDers, dyslexics, and others, the chapter emphasises the necessity for tailored approaches that recognise each learner's strengths and challenges. Educators and coaches can cultivate an environment that encourages self-efficacy, goal-setting, and resilience by integrating coaching frameworks such as the GROW model, CLEAR model, Solution-Focused Coaching, and Motivational Interviewing. This inclusive approach shifts the focus from deficits to strengths, allowing neurodivergent individuals to thrive academically and personally. Through evidence-based practices and a commitment to celebrating neurodiversity, the chapter advocates for a learning landscape where every learner can achieve their full potential, fostering a culture of appreciation and acceptance within educational settings.

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FOUNDATIONS OF COACHING PSYCHOLOGY

Introduction to Coaching Psychology

In the contemporary landscape of personal and professional development, coaching psychology has emerged as a significant and relevant discipline. Its rise is, in part, a response to the growing recognition that traditional models of instruction and support may not adequately address the diverse needs of individuals, particularly in dynamic fields such as education. The increasing emphasis on personalised learning, strengths-based approaches, and the holistic well-being of individuals has created a space for the principles and practices of coaching psychology to evolve. This is especially pertinent when considering neurodivergent learners, for whom conventional educational methods often fall short (The Education Hub, 2023). Coaching psychology offers a tailored pathway, moving beyond generic interventions to foster individual growth by understanding and leveraging unique cognitive, emotional, and social profiles. The discipline's relevance is underscored by its capacity to empower individuals to navigate challenges, enhance performance, and achieve self-determined goals, making it an invaluable tool in fostering human potential across various contexts. Grant (2013) explains that coaching psychology offers tailored, evidence-based interventions that go beyond generic approaches by understanding and utilising individuals' unique cognitive, emotional, and social profiles. This personalised approach enables people to overcome challenges, improve performance, and achieve self-determined goals, thereby fostering human potential across a variety of contexts.

Grant (2016) describes coaching psychology as the systematic application of psychological theories and evidence-based practices aimed at enhancing life experience, improving work performance, and promoting overall wellbeing. A central tenet is the facilitation of goal attainment; coaches work collaboratively with individuals to articulate meaningful, self-congruent goals and to develop actionable strategies for their achievement (Locke, 2002). This process is not merely about task completion but involves a deeper engagement with an individual's values, motivations, and aspirations (Passmore, 2016; Palmer & Whybrow, 2007; Ives, 2008). Furthermore, coaching psychology places a strong emphasis on fostering self-efficacy, the belief in one's capacity to succeed, which is a critical component for sustained effort and resilience in the face of obstacles. By focusing on strengths and past successes, coaching psychology helps individuals build a robust sense of competence and agency (Richter et al., 2021), enabling them to take ownership of their development and proactively work towards enhancing their performance and wellbeing.

Coaching psychology draws upon a rich tapestry of philosophical and theoretical foundations. Ancient philosophical insights, such as Plato's concept of the 'Tripartite Soul' from *The Republic* (ca. 380 BCE), which emphasises balance between the rational, spirited, and appetitive parts of the soul, offer historical parallels to modern coaching's focus on integrating cognitive and emotional aspects of development. This highlights a long-standing recognition of the importance of understanding the whole person. It integrates principles of intrinsic motivation, as explored by Deci and Ryan (2000), and self-efficacy theory, developed by Bandura (1997). The discipline also borrows from fields such as education, sociology, and management, creating an interdisciplinary approach that is both comprehensive and adaptable. This eclectic theoretical base allows coaching psychology to offer flexible and nuanced strategies tailored to individual needs, moving beyond a one-size-fits-all model to support genuine personal and professional growth.

Why Coaching Psychology?

Coaching psychology is a structured, evidence-based process aimed at fostering positive change and development through a collaborative relationship (Grant, 2013; Palmer & Whybrow, 2007). Coaching psychology focuses on activating individuals' potential by enhancing their capabilities, increasing self-awareness, and fostering sustainable change (British Psychological Society, 2024). Coaching psychology is a process that respects the individual's autonomy and capacity for self-direction, fostering an environment where individuals can explore their potential and work towards becoming more effective and fulfilled in their chosen domains (Grant, 2013; Palmer & Whybrow, 2007).

Intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy are two psychological constructs that play a pivotal role in coaching psychology. Intrinsic motivation, as conceptualised by Deci and Ryan (2000) in their Self-Determination Theory, refers to engaging in an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence. Coaching psychology aims to tap into and cultivate this internal drive by helping individuals identify goals that are personally meaningful and aligned with their values and interests. When individuals are intrinsically motivated, they are more likely to persist in their efforts and experience a greater sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

Self-efficacy, a concept central to Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory, refers to an individual's belief in their ability to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments. Coaching psychology actively works to build self-efficacy by helping individuals set achievable sub-goals, providing opportunities for mastery experiences, offering constructive feedback, and highlighting past successes and strengths. As Grant and Stober (2006) note, "Coaches

seek to assist their clients to articulate self-congruent goals and aspirations and to work toward their achievement systematically” (p. 355), a process that inherently bolsters self-efficacy. A strong sense of self-efficacy empowers individuals to tackle challenges, persevere through setbacks, and ultimately achieve their objectives.

Key Coaching Frameworks: An Overview

Numerous coaching frameworks have been developed within coaching psychology, each offering a structured approach to facilitating development. While diverse, these frameworks often share common focus areas. Goal setting is a near-universal component, emphasising the articulation of clear, motivating, and achievable objectives (Locke & Latham, 2002; Grant, 2013). Many frameworks adopt a solution-orientation, shifting the focus from problems and past failures to desired futures and existing strengths (de Shazer, 1985; Grant & Greene, 2004). Client-centred approaches are prevalent in coaching psychology, prioritising the coachee’s agenda, values, and autonomy throughout the coaching process (British Psychological Society, 2006; Rogers, 1961). Other focus areas in coaching psychology include fostering exploration and reflection, developing self-awareness, and empowering individuals to take ownership of their growth (British Psychological Society, 2023; Carden et al., 2022). A hallmark of effective coaching frameworks is their adaptability and flexibility. While models provide a guiding structure, they are not intended to be rigid prescriptions. Skilled coaches adapt these frameworks to suit the unique needs, personality, and context of each individual coachee (Grant, 2013; Passmore, 2016). This might involve blending elements from different models, adjusting the emphasis on particular stages, or modifying techniques to align with the coachee’s learning style and preferences (Grant, 2013; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). The complexity of the coach-coachee relationship and the dynamic nature of human development necessitate a flexible application of coaching models and approaches (de Haan, 2016; Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006). The aim is to create a supportive and responsive coaching experience that fosters the specific support needed for the individual to thrive, rather than forcing the individual to fit a predetermined mould.

Many coaching frameworks are inherently designed to build self-efficacy and resilience (Sipondo & Terblanche, 2024). However, there needs to be caution regarding the promotion of resilience for marginalised populations, such as neurodivergent people (Chamorro-Premuzic & Lusk, 2017; Lewis, 2021). In general, by guiding individuals through the process of setting and achieving meaningful goals, these frameworks provide opportunities for mastery experiences, which are powerful sources of self-efficacy. The process of identifying existing strengths and resources, common in models like Solution-Focused Coaching, further reinforces a belief in one’s capabilities. Moreover, by supporting individuals in navigating

challenges, exploring options, and developing coping strategies, coaching frameworks help to cultivate resilience – the ability to bounce back from adversity. With this in mind, the problem may be clear considering other chapters from this edited collection regarding resilience against adversity when the day-to-day experiences might be inherently adverse to the individual (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2013). For the neuro-majority, the reflective components within many models also encourage learning from both successes and setbacks, contributing to a more robust and adaptable mindset. Ultimately, these frameworks aim to empower individuals not just to achieve immediate goals but to develop the inner resources needed for ongoing growth and effective self-management.

ADAPTING COACHING FRAMEWORKS FOR NEURODIVERGENT LEARNERS IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Understanding Neurodiversity in Educational Contexts

The educational landscape has witnessed a significant evolution in its understanding and support of neurodivergent learners (Dawson, 2022). The neurodiversity paradigm, largely championed by neurodivergent individuals themselves, represents a fundamental shift away from traditional deficit-based medical models. Instead of viewing neurological variations such as autistic people, ADHDers, dyslexics, and others as disorders to be remediated or cured, the neurodiversity paradigm (Walker, 2021) posits these differences as natural and valuable variations in human cognition. Singer (2017), who is credited with first using the term academically in her thesis, articulates that “neurodiversity is the idea that neurological differences are real and valuable forms of human diversity” (p.15). This perspective demands a corresponding evolution in educational approaches, moving away from interventions designed to normalise neurodivergent individuals towards strategies that recognise, respect, and bolster their unique cognitive styles while providing meaningful support for any challenges they may face.

Traditional educational methods, often developed with a neurotypical learner in mind, can inadvertently create significant barriers for neurodivergent individuals. These challenges are frequently not inherent to neurodivergence itself but are, as Chapman (2019) argues, socially constructed through environments and expectations that privilege neurotypical ways of being. Neuronormativity, the assumption that neurotypical experiences and ways of functioning are the default or superior standard, underpins many systemic barriers within educational institutions. These can manifest as inflexible curricula, standardised assessment methods that do not accommodate diverse processing styles, sensory-unfriendly environments, and a lack

of understanding or acceptance of neurodivergent communication and social interaction styles. Recognising that these barriers are often environmental and systemic, rather than residing solely within the individual, calls for a proactive approach to adapting educational settings and practices to be more inclusive and accommodating.

Coaching psychology, with its inherent emphasis on personalised, strengths-based strategies, offers a powerful and affirming framework for supporting neurodivergent learners, a concept further developed within the specialised field of neurodiversity coaching (Doyle & McDowall, 2023). Unlike interventions that may focus on remediating perceived deficits, coaching psychology aligns with neurodiversity principles by centring the individual's own goals, unique strengths, and intrinsic motivations. It provides a collaborative and empowering process where learners are active participants in their own development. By understanding each learner's distinct needs, cognitive profile, and aspirations, coaches can help create an environment where neurodivergent individuals not only cope but thrive. In this context, coaching psychology does not aim to 'fix' neurodivergent traits; rather, it seeks to equip learners with strategies to navigate challenges, leverage their strengths, and achieve self-determined success in a world that is often not designed with their needs in mind. It fosters self-awareness, self-advocacy, and resilience, empowering neurodivergent learners to pursue their full potential.

Core Principles of Neurodiversity-Affirming Coaching Practice

To effectively support neurodivergent learners, coaching practices must be grounded in neurodiversity-affirming principles. These principles, largely developed and advocated by neurodivergent scholars and activists, provide an ethical and effective foundation for respectful and empowering coaching relationships.

A cornerstone of neurodiversity-affirming practice is the recognition of neurodivergence as an integral and often valued aspect of an individual's identity, rather than merely a collection of deficits or a disorder to be managed. This involves approaching the coaching relationship with genuine curiosity and profound respect for the learner's unique neurological experience and subjective worldview. Coaches must move beyond pathologising difference and instead celebrate the diverse strengths, perspectives, and talents that neurodivergent individuals bring. As Walker (2021), an autistic scholar, emphasises, "Neurodiversity-affirming practice requires recognising that the neurodivergent mind isn't broken or incomplete; it's simply different, with its own inherent integrity and value" (p. 78). This means validating the learner's experiences, understanding that their way of thinking, communicating, and interacting is valid, and supporting them in developing a positive neurodivergent identity.

Neurodiversity-affirming coaching requires a conscious and active effort to challenge both societal ableism and the pervasive influence of neuronormativity within educational and support contexts. Ableism, in this context, refers to discrimination or prejudice against disabled individuals, including neurological differences, while neuronormativity is the often-unquestioned assumption that neurotypical ways of thinking, learning, communicating, and behaving are the correct or superior standard. Higher education environments often privilege neurotypical norms and practices, resulting in systemic barriers that can impede the participation and success of neurodivergent students (Clouder et al., 2020). Coaches must critically examine their own potential biases and assumptions. Practical strategies include questioning coaching goals that primarily focus on conformity to neurotypical standards, recognising and validating diverse communication styles (rather than labelling them as deficient), adapting coaching methods to align with the learner's natural cognitive style, and advocating for environmental accommodations rather than solely expecting the learner to adapt to inaccessible or hostile environments.

Accessibility is paramount in neurodiversity-affirming coaching. The coaching environment, encompassing both its physical and interpersonal dimensions, must be designed to be accessible and inclusive for neurodivergent learners. Accessibility is not merely about providing special accommodations but about proactively removing barriers that limit full participation (Shakespeare, 2013). This approach ensures that learners can engage fully without expending unnecessary cognitive or emotional effort navigating environments that are not designed with their needs in mind. Physical and sensory accessibility involves considering factors that can significantly impact a neurodivergent learner's comfort and ability to engage. This includes creating sensory-friendly meeting spaces with options for adjustable lighting, minimised background noise, and comfortable temperature. Providing options for movement during sessions (e.g., standing, pacing, using fidget tools) and flexible seating arrangements can be beneficial for many neurodivergent individuals, particularly ADHDers or autistic people (Aspiranti & Hulac, 2021; Zimmerman, Ledford, & Turner, 2024). Access to fidget tools or other sensory supports should be normalised and readily available. As per Doyle (2020), adapting the sensory environment, including for reducing the potential sensory overwhelm, can be beneficial across neurodivergent people.

Interpersonal accessibility focuses on the nature of the communication and interaction within the coaching relationship. This includes using clear, direct, and unambiguous language, avoiding idioms or sarcasm that may be misinterpreted, especially by some autistic learners. Providing written summaries of discussions, action plans, or visual aids to complement verbal information can aid comprehension and recall for many neurodivergent learners. Flexible session timing, based on the learner's energy levels and executive functioning needs, and offering multiple

communication channels (e.g., text, email, video call, in-person, with options for camera on/off) can also enhance accessibility and reduce stress.

Dr. Damian Milton's (2012) concept of the "Double Empathy Problem" offers a crucial reframing of communication difficulties that can occur between autistic and non-autistic individuals, with broader implications for understanding cross-neurotype interactions. It challenges traditional, deficit-based models (often rooted in Theory of Mind concepts) that locate communication problems solely within the autistic individual. Milton (2012, p. 884) posits that these difficulties arise from a "mutual incomprehension" stemming from different dispositional outlooks and personal conceptual understandings between people of different neurotypes. In essence, communication is a two-way street, and breakdowns can occur due to a mismatch in processing styles and social-cognitive frameworks from both sides.

Research by Crompton et al. (2020) supports this, finding that autistic individuals communicate effectively with other autistic individuals, suggesting that challenges primarily emerge in mixed-neurotype interactions. Similarly, Heasman and Gillespie (2018) noted that neurotypical individuals often misinterpret autistic social cues. For coaches, understanding the Double Empathy Problem means recognising that communication differences are not deficits but natural variations. It necessitates that coaches take responsibility for adapting their own communication style, creating space for neurodivergent forms of expression, avoiding assumptions based on neurotypical expectations, and validating the learner's experiences of social misunderstanding as potentially bidirectional. Fletcher-Watson and Happé (2019) suggest that supporting mutual understanding requires explicit acknowledgment of different perspectives and communication needs. In coaching, this might involve direct conversations about communication preferences, mutual clarification of meaning, and a willingness to learn from each other's interaction styles, fostering a more equitable and effective coaching alliance.

ADAPTING SPECIFIC COACHING FRAMEWORKS FOR NEURODIVERGENT LEARNERS

While established coaching frameworks like GROW, CLEAR, Solution-Focused Coaching (SFC), and Motivational Interviewing (MI) offer valuable structures, their application with neurodivergent learners requires thoughtful adaptation to be truly effective and affirming. These adaptations should consider the diverse communication styles, sensory sensitivities, executive functioning differences (such as challenges

with planning, organisation, initiation, and working memory), and unique strengths often associated with various neurotypes.

Across all frameworks, general adaptations should include: using clear, concise, and direct language; providing information in multiple formats (verbal, written, visual); being mindful of processing time and allowing for pauses; ensuring the coaching environment is sensorily comfortable; breaking down complex tasks or goals into smaller, manageable steps; explicitly teaching or co-creating strategies for organisation and planning; and always prioritising the learner's agency, voice, and self-identified goals (Hamilton & Petty, 2023).

Adapting the GROW Model for Neurodivergent Learners

The GROW Model (Goal, Reality, Options, Will)

The GROW model, widely popularised by Sir John Whitmore (2009), is one of the most well-known and extensively used coaching frameworks. Its acronym stands for its four sequential stages: Goal, Reality, Options, and Will (or Way Forward). The Goal stage involves the coach assisting the coachee in clarifying and defining what they want to achieve, both in the immediate coaching session and in the longer term. This requires establishing specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals where appropriate. The Reality stage focuses on exploring the coachee's current situation in relation to their goal. This involves an honest assessment of the present circumstances, including internal and external factors, progress made so far, existing resources, and potential obstacles. The Options stage encourages brainstorming and generating a wide range of possible strategies, actions, or solutions that could help the coachee move from their current reality towards their desired goal. The emphasis is on creative and expansive thinking. Finally, the Will (or Way Forward) stage involves the coachee committing to specific actions. This includes selecting the most promising options, creating a concrete action plan with defined steps and timelines, and establishing mechanisms for accountability and support.

The GROW model (Goal, Reality, Options, Will) can be adapted. For the Goal stage, ensure goals are co-created with the learner, tapping into their intrinsic motivations and special interests where possible. Goals should be highly specific, concrete, and broken down into small, achievable steps, especially considering potential executive functioning differences. Visualising the goal or its outcome can be helpful (HRDQ Staff, 2023).

In the Reality stage, explore the current situation with sensitivity to sensory processing differences, communication preferences, and past experiences (which may include negative experiences in neurotypical systems). Focus on identifying

existing strengths, talents, and resources that align with their neurotype, rather than solely focusing on deficits or challenges. The ‘Reality’ phase, which involves an objective assessment of the current situation, may need to be more concrete and less abstract for learners who struggle with abstract thinking or perspective-taking. Using specific examples, visual aids, or breaking down the ‘reality check’ into smaller, more tangible parts can be helpful (Miller & O’Bryan, 2020).

For Options, encourage a wide range of strategies, including unconventional ones that might suit their unique thinking styles. Visual aids, mind-mapping tools, or allowing learners to express options in non-verbal ways can be beneficial. For the ‘Options’ phase, more structured brainstorming techniques like mind mapping, SCAMPER, or categorised lists might be more effective than open-ended brainstorming for some neurodivergent learners (Else, n.d.; MindTools, n.d.). and ensure a non-judgmental space for all ideas. For the Will (or Way Forward) stage, action plans must be highly specific, with clear, sequential steps. Visual schedules, checklists, reminders (e.g., app-based), and other external supports can be invaluable (Safer-Lichtenstein et al., 2024). Accountability should be supportive and flexible, acknowledging that consistency can be a challenge, and reframing setbacks as learning opportunities.

Some critics point to the model’s potential limitations. The model can sometimes be perceived as overly linear or mechanistic if applied too rigidly. Its primary focus on goals and performance might also lead to a neglect of deeper underlying issues, emotions, or relational dynamics if the coach does not skilfully broaden the exploration within each stage.

Adapting the CLEAR Model for Neurodivergent Learners

The CLEAR model, developed by Peter Hawkins and Nick Smith (2013), offers a comprehensive framework for coaching conversations that emphasises the coaching relationship and reflective practice. Its acronym represents five key phases: Contracting, Listening, Exploring, Action, and Review. Contracting involves establishing a clear agreement and mutual understanding between the coach and coachee regarding the purpose, scope, goals, roles, responsibilities, and boundaries of the coaching engagement. This sets the foundation for a trusting and effective partnership. Listening emphasises the coach’s role in active, empathetic, and non-judgmental listening to fully understand the coachee’s perspective, experiences, and concerns. This creates a safe space for open dialogue. Exploring is the phase where the coach uses skillful questioning and other techniques to help the coachee delve deeper into their issues, challenges, opportunities, thoughts, and feelings, facilitating insight and self-awareness. Action focuses on collaboratively developing a plan with specific, achievable steps that the coachee will take to move forward. This stage emphasises

coachee ownership and commitment. Finally, Review involves regularly reflecting on progress, learning from actions taken, celebrating successes, addressing any obstacles, and making necessary adjustments to the plan or coaching approach.

The CLEAR model places particular emphasis on the Contracting phase, viewing it as fundamental to the success of the entire coaching process. Gessnitzer and Kauffeld (2015) support this emphasis, stating that “coaching starts before it starts,” referring to the importance of the coachee’s readiness and the quality of the initial agreement. Effective contracting goes beyond a mere formal agreement; it establishes clarity, manages expectations, builds trust, and defines the psychological contract between coach and coachee. It ensures that both parties are aligned on the objectives and the process, which is especially crucial when working with diverse individuals who may have different communication styles or expectations. A robust contract provides a secure base from which the coaching relationship can develop, and challenging work can be undertaken.

The CLEAR model’s emphasis on contracting is particularly valuable for neurodivergent learners, as establishing clear agreements helps reduce uncertainty and provides a structured foundation for coaching. This relational focus supports adapting coaching approaches to individual needs, fostering trust and clarity throughout the process (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2020; Doyle & McDowall, 2023). Explicitly define roles, responsibilities, communication preferences (e.g., preference for literal interpretations, directness, how feedback is given/received), session structure, and boundaries. Ensure the contract is personalised to accommodate unique needs and strengths, making it a living document that can be revisited.

Listening must be adapted to encompass patience with varying processing speeds and an understanding of non-standard or neurodivergent communication styles (e.g., differences in eye contact, body language, tone, or use of echolalia). It is necessary to validate the learners’ experiences without imposing neurotypical interpretations. Create a space where learners feel safe to communicate authentically, without needing to mask their neurodivergent traits.

When Exploring, use clear, unambiguous questions whilst allowing for various methods of exploration, such as drawing, writing, using assistive technology, or movement. Be mindful of potential difficulties with abstract concepts or hypothetical scenarios for some learners and provide concrete examples or scaffolded support.

In the Action phase, collaborate to define action plans that are broken down into very small, achievable steps. Incorporate visual supports, checklists, or technology as helpful. Crucially, ensure the learner has full agency in defining these actions and that they align with their strengths, interests, and values.

Review sessions are vital. Focus on what is working from the learner’s perspective. Be highly flexible and prepared to adjust plans significantly. Celebrate all successes, no matter how small, and approach challenges with empathy, focusing

on learning, adaptation, and problem-solving rather than perceived failure. Ensure reflective practices are accessible and meaningful to the individual.

Adapting Solutions Focused Coaching for Neurodivergent Learners

Solution-Focused Coaching (SFC) is derived from Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), developed by Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg, and their colleagues in the 1980s (de Shazer, 1985). SFC shifts the traditional problem-solving focus towards identifying and constructing solutions. Its core principles include: a focus on the coachee's desired future rather than past problems or deficits; an emphasis on identifying and amplifying existing strengths, resources, and past successes (exceptions to the problem); the belief that change is constant and inevitable; and the idea that small changes can lead to larger transformations. The approach is collaborative, with the coach adopting a stance of respectful curiosity and "not knowing."

A key characteristic of SFC is its unwavering emphasis on the coachee's strengths, resources, and preferred future. Instead of analysing the causes and intricacies of a problem, the coach helps the coachee articulate a detailed vision of what life would be like if the problem were solved or the goal achieved (the "miracle question" is a common technique). The conversation then explores times when aspects of this preferred future have already happened, even in small ways, and what made those exceptions possible. This process helps the coachee recognise their inherent capabilities and build on what is already working, fostering hope and self-efficacy.

In SFC, the coach's role is not to provide solutions but to skilfully facilitate the coachee's process of discovering and constructing their own solutions. This is achieved through specific questioning techniques, such as scaling questions (e.g., "On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is your preferred future, where are you now?" and "What would it take to move one point higher?"), coping questions (e.g., "Given all you have been through, how have you managed to cope so well?"), and questions that presuppose change and competence. The coach listens intently for "solution talk" and amplifies it, helping the coachee build a concrete and actionable path forward based on their own insights and abilities. The focus is on small, manageable steps that move the coachee in the direction of their goals.

SFC's strengths-based, future-oriented approach aligns well with neurodiversity-affirming principles:

When Establishing the Coaching Relationship and outlining the SFC process, create a predictable and sensorily comfortable environment (Kellett & Bell, 2025). Clearly explain the collaborative, non-problem-focused nature of SFC. In Exploring the Desired Future (e.g., using the "miracle question"), help learners articulate their vision in concrete, sensory-rich terms if possible. Use visualisations, storytelling, or

drawing if helpful, always focusing on what success looks and feels like *for them*, not based on external norms.

When Identifying Strengths and Resources, explicitly explore and validate unique cognitive strengths often associated with neurodivergence (e.g., intense focus/hyperfocus, pattern recognition, creativity, attention to detail, strong sense of justice, loyalty) and discuss how these can be leveraged.

In Developing Action Plans, ensure steps are small, concrete, and build directly upon identified strengths and past successes (“exceptions”). Focus on what the learner will *do* rather than what they will *not do*.

The Review and Amplification phase should meticulously focus on noticing, acknowledging, and celebrating any progress towards the desired future, no matter how incremental. This reinforces their capabilities and builds self-efficacy.

Adapting Motivational Interviewing (MI) for Neurodivergent Learners

Motivational Interviewing (MI) was developed by William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick (2013) initially for working with individuals ambivalent about changing addictive behaviours, but its application has since expanded to a wide range of areas, including health, education, and personal development. Miller and Rollnick (2013) define MI as “a particular way of talking with people about change and growth to strengthen their motivation and commitment” (p. 4). It is a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication with particular attention to the language of change. MI is designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person’s own reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion.

MI is guided by a specific “spirit” or mindset, which is more fundamental than any set of techniques. This spirit is characterised by partnership (collaboration between coach and coachee), acceptance (valuing the coachee’s autonomy, worth, and perspective), compassion (actively promoting the coachee’s welfare), and evocation (drawing out the coachee’s own ideas and motivations for change, rather than imposing them). As Miller and Rollnick (2013) state, “the spirit of MI starts from this latter strengths focused premise, that people already have within much of what is needed.... And the implicit message in MI is you have what you need, and we will find it” (p. 15). Core principles include expressing empathy, developing discrepancy (between current behaviour and important goals/values), rolling with resistance (avoiding argumentation), and supporting self-efficacy.

While MI is a fluid conversational style, it generally involves several overlapping processes or phases. Engagement is the process of establishing a helpful connection and working relationship. Focusing is the process by which coach and coachee develop and maintain a specific direction in the conversation about change. Evoking

involves eliciting the coachee's own motivations for change ("change talk") and lies at the heart of MI. This is done by exploring their reasons, desires, abilities, and needs related to the change. Planning encompasses both developing commitment to change and formulating a specific plan of action. This phase is entered when the coachee shows signs of readiness. While not always explicitly listed as a phase, Follow-Up is often crucial for reviewing progress, reinforcing commitment, and adjusting plans as needed. It is important to note that while MI focuses on individual behaviour change, this must be considered within broader socio-political contexts, particularly for neurodivergent individuals who often face systemic barriers and ableism that extend beyond individual behaviours that MI traditionally targets.

MI's client-centred, evocative approach can be effective if adapted with sensitivity:

Engagement requires building rapport by actively honouring and adapting to neurodivergent communication styles (e.g., being prepared for directness or literalness in autistic learners, or a more dynamic, tangential style in ADHD learners). Patience, active listening without interruption, and clear affirmation of their perspective are key.

When focusing on goals, ensure these are deeply aligned with the learner's intrinsic motivations, special interests, and cognitive styles. For example, an ADHD learner might prefer goals offering novelty and variety, while an autistic learner might be highly motivated by goals related to their deep interests or those that create order and predictability.

Evoking change talk needs particular sensitivity to potential executive functioning differences (which might affect articulating future plans or weighing pros and cons), sensory sensitivities (which might be barriers to certain changes), or past negative experiences with change. Explore ambivalence without pressure, using reflective listening and affirmations generously.

Planning must be highly tailored. An ADHD learner might benefit from plans that incorporate creativity, allow for hyperfocus bursts, and have external structures for less engaging but necessary tasks; indeed, coaching approaches for ADHD adults have shown efficacy (Kubik, 2010), and specific processes involved in motivation and goal completion for ADHD college students have been explored (Prevatt et al., 2017), highlighting the value of tailored strategies. An autistic learner might prefer highly predictable, systematic plans that build on their strengths in logical thinking and routine, and life skills coaching programs have been developed and explored from coaches' perspectives for autistic adults (Hillier et al., 2021).

Follow-up is essential for refining strategies based on real-world experiences and emerging insights, maintaining a supportive, nonjudgmental, and collaborative stance.

Crucially, when applying MI with neurodivergent individuals, it is vital to acknowledge that many challenges they face are due to systemic ableism and inaccessible environments, not just individual ambivalence or lack of motivation. To note,

for dyslexics, attitudes towards them and their performance (i.e., time management and organisational skills) may be interpreted by employers as issues of the dyslexic persons' attitude, motivation or personality factors rather than them being dyslexic (Doyle & McDowall, 2015). A truly neurodiversity-affirming application of MI considers these external factors and may involve coaching around self-advocacy for environmental adaptations alongside personal strategies, rather than solely focusing on individual behavioural change within a non-accommodating system.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PEER MENTORING AND NEURODIVERGENT-LED INITIATIVES

Coaching psychology offers a versatile framework for establishing a wide array of goals with neurodivergent learners, effectively spanning academic and social domains. Beyond formal coaching by professionals, there is growing recognition of the profound value of peer mentoring and initiatives led by neurodivergent individuals themselves. These approaches offer unique benefits rooted in shared lived experience and can powerfully complement traditional support structures.

Projects like the Cygnet Mentoring Project (Milton et al., 2020), which paired autistic university students with autistic mentors, have demonstrated significant benefits. These include improved academic success, enhanced social confidence, and greater overall wellbeing for mentees. Milton et al. (2020) highlight that "The shared experiential knowledge between autistic mentor and mentee created a foundation of mutual understanding that facilitated more effective support" (p. 32). This shared understanding often allows mentors to offer highly relevant, practical, and authentic strategies based on their own experiences navigating similar challenges, which can be more readily accepted and implemented by mentees.

Neurodivergent-to-neurodivergent mentoring and peer support can foster a powerful sense of belonging and validation, which is crucial for individuals who may often feel isolated or misunderstood in predominantly neurotypical environments (Woods et al., 2018). These spaces allow for authentic self-expression without the need for masking or conforming to neurotypical social expectations. Raymaker et al. (2019) noted that autistic-led groups provided environments where individuals could express themselves authentically and connect with others who understood their experiences on a deep level. This can be incredibly affirming and contribute significantly to positive identity development and mental health.

The success of neurodivergent-led initiatives has important implications for the broader field of coaching. It underscores the need to: incorporate insights from neurodivergent-led research and practice; consult with and learn from neurodivergent experts when developing coaching programs; create opportunities for

and facilitate connections to peer support networks; and genuinely recognise and value the expertise that comes from lived experience. Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al. (2019) argue for the critical importance of incorporating neurodivergent voices in research and practice that concerns them. Furthermore, educational institutions and coaching organisations should actively consider recruiting, training, and supporting neurodivergent coaches and mentors. As Giwa Onaiwu (2020) notes, the depth of understanding provided by lived experience expertise is something that cannot be fully replicated by training alone, no matter how comprehensive.

TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION FOR EDUCATORS AS COACHES

While educators can integrate foundational coaching skills into their practice with some initial professional development, more formal or intensive coaching roles, particularly those grounded in established coaching psychology principles and specifically tailored to the nuanced needs of neurodivergent learners, generally benefit from, and in many instances necessitate, additional, specialised training, and potentially certification. The level of training often corresponds to the depth and formality of the coaching being provided. For all educators, foundational coaching skills can be acquired through workshops or professional development sessions focusing on techniques such as active listening, the art of powerful questioning, fostering a growth mindset, identifying student strengths, and basic goal-setting strategies. This foundational layer should also include essential knowledge about neurodiversity and the principles of neurodiversity-affirming practice. The primary benefit of this foundational training is the creation of a more supportive, empowering, and inclusive classroom culture that benefits all students, including those who are neurodivergent.

For individuals in specialised coaching roles, such as SENCOs, school counsellors, or dedicated academic coaches, more in-depth training programs would be recommended. These programs delve into specific coaching models like GROW, OSKAR, or Solution-Focused Coaching, cover advanced coaching techniques, address critical ethical considerations, and provide targeted strategies for working effectively with diverse neurodivergent populations. This includes understanding the complexities of executive function often associated with ADHDers, addressing sensory needs common with autistic people, and navigating varied communication differences. While not always mandated by educational institutions, pursuing certification from reputable coaching organisations, such as the International Coaching Federation (ICF), or from specialised neurodiversity coaching academies, significantly enhances a coach's credibility, ensures adherence to rigorous ethical standards, and

signifies a higher level of skill. Some coaching programs offer specific credentials such as the Certified Neurodiversity Coach (CNC), which involves comprehensive training and mentoring tailored to supporting neurodiverse clients (Coach Approach Training Institute, 2025). Such specialised training equips these professionals to deliver more structured, intensive, and impactful coaching interventions that are precisely tailored to individual student needs. External Specialist Coaches, who are often brought in for their deep expertise, typically hold professional coaching certifications and specialised training in areas such as ADHD, autism, or executive function coaching (Neuro Directions, 2025; ADHD Foundation, 2023; ADHD Works, 2025). This additional training is crucial because effective coaching for neurodivergent learners demands a profound understanding of different neurotypes, their associated strengths and challenges, and an unwavering commitment to neurodiversity-affirming approaches that avoid promoting masking or pathologising neurodivergent traits. Formal training also instils ethical guidelines, clarifies professional boundaries, and helps coaches recognise when to refer a student for other forms of support, such as therapy, thereby ensuring a safe, effective, and holistic approach to student development.

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROPRIATENESS OF COACHING ACROSS AGE GROUPS

Coaching psychology interventions, when thoughtfully adapted, offer significant benefits to neurodivergent learners across a broad developmental spectrum, from middle childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood. The specific emphasis and complexity of the coaching approach must, however, be carefully related to the learner's developmental stage, cognitive abilities, and individual support requirements. During middle childhood, approximately ages eight to eleven, coaching tends to focus on building foundational executive function skills, such as organising school materials or simple homework planning (Anderson, 2002; Kenworthy et al., 2014). It also supports emotional self-awareness, like identifying basic feelings, and early social understanding, including concepts like turn-taking or sharing ideas in a structured manner (Durlak, 2011). Developing self-advocacy skills, such as learning to ask for help with a specific task, is a key area that supports learners' independence and confidence in educational settings. According to Wehmeyer (2015), self-advocacy involves understanding one's own needs and rights, effectively communicating them, and actively participating in decisions that affect one's life. Teaching these skills early promotes greater academic success and social inclusion. The coaching approach for this age group is typically more concrete and may be play-based or seamlessly integrated into learning activities

to engage children effectively and support developmental needs (Bruner, 1966). Visual supports, appropriately co-designed token economies when suitable, and immediate positive reinforcement are vital components of effective coaching interventions, and sessions are generally shorter to match learners' attention spans and optimise engagement (Hodgdon, 1995). The benefit of such early coaching lies in its capacity to build crucial skills and foster confidence before learners encounter more complex academic and social demands, laying a strong foundation for future success (Durlak et al., 2011).

As learners transition into adolescence, roughly ages twelve to eighteen, coaching can focus on developing advanced executive functions such as long-term project planning, effective time management, and complex study skills, which are critical for academic success and independence (Diamond & Ling, 2016). Concurrently, coaching supports the development of emotional regulation strategies, the ability to navigate complex social dynamics, the formation of self-identity, initial career exploration, and comprehensive transition planning for higher education or employment (Steinberg, 2014). The coaching approach for adolescents can become more reflective and incorporate abstract thinking, although concrete strategies remain essential to support effective learning and self-regulation (Keating, 2004). Goal setting becomes a more collaborative and future-oriented endeavour during adolescence, with peer coaching or group coaching formats particularly effective for addressing social goals and enhancing motivation (Jacob et al., 2025). This period is critical for fostering independence and self-determination, and coaching can significantly contribute to academic success, positive social integration, and thorough preparation for post-secondary life (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2010). For young adults, approximately ages eighteen to twenty-five and beyond, coaching often centres on achieving success in higher education, including managing demanding university workloads and developing independent living skills (Schlossberg, 2011). It also extends to career development, encompassing job searching, honing workplace skills, refining professional communication, building meaningful relationships, and managing overall life responsibilities (Carter et al., 2011). Coaching at this stage is typically highly self-directed, concentrating on the individual's specific goals and challenges as they navigate the complexities of adult life (Grant, 2013). It can be highly specialised, such as 'ADHD coaching' for university students or career coaching tailored for autistic adults, thereby supporting successful transitions into adulthood, higher education, and the workforce, and ultimately fostering greater independence and well-being. It is important to recognise that while chronological age provides a general guide, individual variation in developmental stage, cognitive profile, communication style, and support needs are more critical determinants in tailoring the coaching focus and approach effectively.

CONCLUSION: ADVANCING NEUROINCLUSIVE EDUCATION THROUGH ADAPTED COACHING PSYCHOLOGY

This chapter has positioned the potential of coaching psychology when thoughtfully adapted and applied within a neurodiversity-affirming framework to support neurodivergent learners in educational settings. We have explored how these frameworks can be tailored to honour the unique cognitive profiles, communication styles, sensory needs, and strengths of neurodivergent individuals. By shifting from a deficit-based perspective to one that recognises neurodiversity as a valuable aspect of human variation, and by actively challenging ableism and neuronormativity, coaching psychology can become a useful tool for empowerment. The importance of creating accessible environments, understanding concepts like the Double Empathy Problem, and valuing neurodivergent-led initiatives has also been highlighted as integral to this affirming approach.

The insights presented call for concerted action from educators, coaches, institutions, and policymakers. Educational institutions must move beyond token gestures of inclusion towards systemic change, embedding neurodiversity-affirming principles and UDL into their culture, policies, and practices. This includes investing in comprehensive training for all staff, creating genuinely accessible learning environments, and actively recruiting and supporting neurodivergent educators and support personnel. Coaches have a responsibility to engage in ongoing learning and critical self-reflection to ensure their practice is truly affirming and effective, adapting their methodologies and centering the lived experiences of their neurodivergent clients. Professional coaching bodies should also integrate neurodiversity awareness and affirming practices into their training and ethical guidelines.

While the application of coaching psychology in neurodivergent education is promising, further research is needed to continue building the evidence base for specific adapted approaches and their long-term outcomes. Participatory research, co-designed and co-led with neurodivergent individuals, is particularly crucial to ensure that research questions and methodologies are relevant and respectful. Future practice should focus on developing more nuanced and individualised coaching approaches, exploring the intersectionality of neurodivergence with other aspects of identity, and fostering stronger collaborations between educational institutions, coaching practitioners, and neurodivergent communities. By embracing these directions, we can continue to advance neuroinclusive education, creating environments where all learners have the opportunity to thrive, achieve their potential, and contribute their unique talents to the world.

Table 1. Tips: Practical applications and environmental considerations in education

Area	Practical Tip	Environmental Consideration
Institutional Culture	Foster a coaching-friendly, neuroinclusive culture; promote flexibility and a growth mindset	Move away from rigid, one-size-fits-all approaches; personalise learning pathways
Universal Design for Learning (UDL)	Apply UDL principles to curriculum and materials; offer multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression	Design proactively to reduce the need for later accommodations
Staff Training	Train all educators (not just specialists) on neurodiversity, affirming practices, and coaching skills	Challenge deficit-based thinking; promote acceptance and value of difference
Physical & Sensory Environment	Adjust lighting, noise, seating, and temperature; provide quiet zones and movement options	Create uncluttered, clearly defined spaces; offer flexible seating and sensory supports
Digital Accessibility	Ensure digital materials are accessible (screen readers, adjustable fonts/contrast, clear navigation)	Adhere to web accessibility standards; offer technological support as needed
Flexibility in Timing	Allow flexible session lengths, frequent breaks, extra time, and predictable schedules	Provide advance notice of changes; maintain a clear structure and routine
Visual Supports	Use visual schedules, task checklists, timers, graphic organisers, and social narratives	Aid understanding, predictability, and task management
Technology-Based Supports	Utilise organisation/time management apps, text-to-speech, speech-to-text, and concept mapping tools	Leverage technology to support learning and engagement
Explicit Instruction	Teach skills, routines, and expectations directly; break tasks into small, clear steps	Provide both verbal and written instructions; reinforce with positive feedback
Motivation & Engagement	Use learners' interests to engage; give frequent, specific, positive reinforcement	Enhance motivation and learning outcomes

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