



The Learning Institute

Think Piece #2: GROW Coaching (10-minute read)

Overview

Mental Health Snippets are free-to-use items taken from or inspired by our Foundation Degrees, and BA and BSc top-up degree study programmes.

Use them to maintain and enhance your own mental health and wellbeing, and of other adults, children and young people you know and work with.



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You know how it is. There are lots of occasions when people you know come to you and say “Can you give me some advice?” It’s probably in your nature to say “Yes, of course, if I can – what’s up?” And of course, you may be able to give really great advice which is exactly what the person wants. But the thing is, where does that leave the person next time they have a problem? [You can get **a lot** of phone calls and emails once you get a reputation as ‘someone who always knows what to do!’] And what happens when the person has a problem and you aren’t around?

Really, if you want to help people with their problems, the thing to do is to **resist the temptation to solve it for them** and instead **show them how to solve it for themselves**. You can do that through **coaching**.

In this ‘Think Piece’ I’m going to give a very brief outline of a model of coaching which is really popular [especially in business]. It was invented by Sir John Whitmore back in the 1980s and which is known as the GROW model.

By the way, there are endless arguments among practitioners about the difference between coaching and counselling [and mentoring], but I won’t go into those here, except to say that counselling is usually a longer term intervention which is intended to bring about generalised and quite significant changes in people’s lives – counselling is much closer to therapy, and that requires trained practitioners.

One of the reasons why GROW is so influential is because you don’t have to have any certification to become a GROW coach, and that means that GROW can be practised by almost anyone, and with little if any financial outlay [you’d still do well to talk to someone who is experienced in GROW coaching, or to buy one of Whitmore’s books before you begin, though].

I have taught literally hundreds of staff in dozens of schools to be GROW coaches. I’ve taught SLTs who wanted to coach middle leaders, middle leaders who wanted to coach NQTs, and TAs who wanted to coach children and young people [in some schools, staff then taught the children to be coaches too].

So here I am going to write about what GROW is and how I suggest that you could use it pretty much right away.

GROW starts from the premise that we all have problems from time to time, and that we can all solve most of those problems by ourselves, though we may need someone to help us to identify and understand the issues we think are standing in our way. **In a way, GROW is a training in problem-solving.**

GROW is an acronym, and it stands for the four parts of Whitmore’s model:

GOAL – REALITY – OPTIONS – WHAT NEXT? [you will find when you read about GROW that these are sometimes given slightly different names].

In a minute I’ll show you some examples of the parts of a GROW session so you can imagine what it’s like and if you think you might have the qualities it takes to be a good GROW coach. **But first I’ll say that when I have used GROW I have always called it C-GROW and used the four stages in a slightly different order to the one which Whitmore suggested** [I really wanted to call it iGROW, for reasons which are likely to be obvious, but unfortunately it didn’t fit]. Here’s the

order I have always used in both coaching and training and my reasons why [to be pedantic, my way is really [C-RGOW](#), but you can see that doesn't quite roll off the tongue]:

[The C is for your CONTRACT](#) with [your person](#) [technically your person is called your 'coachee', but that's a horrid word, so I always call my own coachee 'my person'].

The [CONTRACT](#) isn't technically part of GROW but it's really important. Before you start coaching, you need to check that your person actually wants to be coached, and to assure her that everything which is said between you will be confidential, and that if at any time she [or you] want to stop or take a break, you just stop or take a break. And also that if anything comes out of the woodwork which requires particular skills or understanding which you [as a coach] don't have, that you will stop and signpost your person on to someone who is more capable in that area. Agree all of that before you begin. [That's your CONTRACT](#). [In some cases, you may even want to write that down and get your person to sign it to show that they understand]. Be prepared, because although most coaching is pretty straightforward, sometimes the unexpected happens [it's almost a golden rule of coaching that whatever your person first tells you the problem is, it's actually almost certainly something else].

Depending on your person, and whether or not you already know them, you may want to establish a relationship. You might think it's funny to say "you may want to", but actually some people like to be coached by someone from whom they have a 'psychic distance' [and who isn't going to say "Hi, how's it all going?" when you bump into them in the skincare aisle in Tesco]. You'll have to feel your way with this one.

[Next I go to R for REALITY.](#)

This is where I ask my person what her problem is; I want to know what is going on in her world. [When I was going through certification as a different sort of coach, my trainer told me "When you're coaching, imagine your person's problem is a cabbage. Imagine she's holding that cabbage, and you're helping your person to strip off leaf after leaf. Do you know what the very middle of a cabbage is called? It's called 'the heart'. Your job is to help your person to get to the heart of her cabbage and see it as it really is for the first time"]. So I'm like a very subtle dog with a bone here [since dogs don't do this with cabbages], stripping away layer after layer until we get to the heart of the problem – "So why exactly is this an issue?" "And why do you think this keeps going on?" "But why would she say that?" – that sort of thing. [Sometimes this in itself solves the problem right there and then: "*OMG, this is all because I got promoted and she didn't!*"]. In the [REALITY](#) phase also I will ask "How important is it to you to solve this problem, on a scale of one to ten?" If my person answers with a number less than five, it isn't really a problem.

At the end of the [REALITY](#) phase, I go to the [GOAL](#) phase [I just can't see that it makes sense to ask your person to set a [GOAL before](#) she has fully understood her [REALITY, can you?](#)]

In the [GOAL](#) phase I ask my person what she wants as the result of our coaching work to be. "What will your relationship be like when you achieve your goal?" "How will you be with each other?" "How will you know when you have achieved your goal?" "What will your conversations be like once you have sorted out your issue?"

Once you've done this, over half of your coaching is complete. Now your person has actually seen her problem for what it really is, she's decided what her outcomes will look and sound like, so

all you have left to do is to help her to find a way to fix the situation, and then to draw up a timeline for action.

In the **OPTIONS** phase you are helping your person to find ways out of or around the issue. Remember, it's not your place to be making these suggestions [You are never going to say – as some other types of coaches might – “What if you started going to a different pub?”] And in a way you will do the cabbage thing again because you want to be able to **help your person to think of a number of possible OPTIONS**. “OK, I can see that might be useful – what else might work?”; “Are there any things you could change at home which could help?”; “Do you think there might be any downsides if you did that?”; “How likely is that to work out in the way you want it to?” Think cabbage heart.

The **REALITY** and **OPTIONS** phases are where most of the work is done. At the end of the **OPTIONS** phase, you want your person to have come up with a number of **possibilities for action** because she will need them as raw material when we get to **WHAT NEXT?**

In the **WHAT NEXT?** phase you are going to tie your person down to a set of actions. Go back and tell your person what she has said at each stage: “So let's just recap. **You've told me** that you suddenly have a bad relationship with someone who's been a really good friend for ages. **You said** that the problem was seven out of ten and that it was affecting your work and your home life too, and that it's making you really depressed and it's even stopping you from going out. Then **you realised** that the root of the problem seems to be your promotion, and that maybe because you've been so keen to do well in your new post, you've concentrated on work and haven't been in so much contact with your friend as you normally would have been. Then **you identified** some things you could do which would let you do your job, but which would also help your friend to see that you hadn't become distant, just busy, and that you are missing your relationship which you value so much. So **you've decided** to tell your friend what hard work your job is, how it's swallowing you up a bit at the moment and that although you like the job and the extra bit of money, you feel really bad that it's meant for a while that you couldn't be as close as you want to be, and that's been really hard. **So you've made a decision** to sit her down and tell her all this, soon, and tell her that you're making changes to your work-life balance so that your friendship can get back to where it was and where you want it to be”. **Did you notice all those bold underlines?** You are reminding your person that **she has found a way out of her problem HERSELF** [who needs a coach 😊?]

Now you tie your person down. Ask her **exactly what** she will say. Exactly. [Role-play it if you like]. **Ask her exactly when and where** she will do it. Exactly when and where. **And ask her exactly when she will contact you** to tell you how it went. Exactly when. If necessary put your person in a 'double-bind' [that's where it sounds like you are giving her a choice but actually you aren't - it's for her own good, so go right ahead and do it]. So if you ask “When will you talk to your friend?” and your person says “Next week,” that's no good. Say “OK, which days do you see her?” and when your person says “On Tuesday morning and on Thursday afternoon,” you do the double-bind and say “Great, so will you speak to her on Tuesday morning or on Thursday afternoon?” And when she says “On Tuesday morning,” you give her another double-bind and say “Great – will that be before or after break?” And when she says “Before break,” you give her

another double-bind [you could see this one coming] and say “Fantastic. So will you text me at the end of break or just before lunch? Great. I’ll expect to get your text at about 12 then. Yes? Yes!”

FINALLY, GET YOUR PERSON to **write down what they will do and where and when**, and take a photo of it on your phone [with your person’s permission, of course – “This is a fantastic plan **you’ve worked out** – do you mind if I take a photo?”]

Do you see that next time your person has a problem, they can very likely go through the GROW phases and resolve it themselves. [My certification trainer told me “Remember that the best coaches find themselves unemployed after every session!”] Do you see also that your person may well start to use a GROW approach herself to help other people [hopefully just once per person]?

GROW [come on, we both know it should really be **C-RGOW** now], can be really useful as a problem-solving framework. It’s easy to use with most people, and it works with people of almost any age, and it’s easy to remember the steps. **So try it.**

*****A caveat**. Right at the beginning of this piece, I said that GROW works on the basis of the belief that we know the answers to our own problems. Often that’s true, at least if we have a good coach to guide us through the process of stripping away all those cabbage leaves. But actually, sometimes we really DON’T know the answers to our own problems. In those [relatively few] cases we will likely need a different kind of [trained] coach, or a trained mentor or a counsellor or a therapist.

Things you might like to do now:

- Look online for information about GROW. Most information will be business-oriented, but not all, so try to find one which fits with your own practice. Here’s a page from the University of Warwick to get you started on the right track [they think GROW is part of mentoring and call their W ‘Will’ or ‘Wrap-Up’]:
<https://warwick.ac.uk/study/cll/courses/professionaldevelopment/wmcett/resources/practitionerarea/mentoring/planning/grow>
In case you can’t copy from a pdf, I’ve given you a shortlink here: shorturl.at/djrv5
- Tick the box when you’ve read Warwick’s page:
- Find some videos of GROW coaching sessions actually taking place. Can you see the phases taking place?
- Try out the GROW model yourself.
- Consider if using GROW might be helpful to you personally or professionally.
- Show someone else this snippet, and ask them if they think GROW could be a useful problem-solving framework for them too.
- Next time you have a problem, see if you can use your knowledge of GROW to solve it, or ask the person you’ve shared this snippet with to act as your coach.

For your notes:

Want to learn more?

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