Reviewer's report

**Title:** Can life coaching improve health outcomes? - a systematic review of intervention studies

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 1 July 2013

**Reviewer:** Ruth Wolever

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The topic is timely and of great interest to helping individuals change health behaviors for managing chronic disease. I have just completed a review of the medical literature on the definition of health coaching, so was delighted to read this. And concur with your observations about the confusion in the literature.

**Major Compulsory Revisions:**

While the methods are likely sound, it will be more apparent how systematic and thorough the review is when two things are added. First, I suggest the use of the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. (See Moher D, Altman DG, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J. PRISMA statement. Epidemiology. 2011 Jan;22(1):128 and Liberati A, Altman DG, Tetzlaff J, Mulrow C, Gøtzsche PC, et al. (2009) The PRISMA statement for reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses of studies that evaluate health care interventions: explanation and elaboration. PLoS Med 6(7):e1000100). While many elements of PRISMA are included in the paper now, use of the full-guidelines would allow a more solid presentation. For example, Figure 1 needs to have the 4120 titles and abstracts (as well as the 105 abstracts, and 131 full-text papers) broken out so that reasons for exclusion are not lumped together, but specifically counted (e.g., technical coaching n = XX; peer coaching N = YY, etc.). While the conclusions are likely sound, given the stringent inclusion/exclusion criteria, the extremely large number of exclusions makes it even more important that more details be given on the break down.

Second, justification for the decision to include papers from earlier than Dec 2011 is not provided, and is important. Additional articles would likely be included were the timelines adjusted. For example,


Exclusion of coaching for exercise needs to be justified also. I agree with excluding papers on coaching athletics, but there are published reports of programs on coaching medical patients to exercise that would reasonably be included. It might just be a language issue.

Is the writing acceptable? While the authors’ English is excellent (and a million times better than my Dutch), the article needs to be reviewed by a native English speaker review for phraseology. For example, the third sentence of the Conclusion in the abstract does not clearly convey its meaning.

Is the question posed by the authors well defined? The first research question is well defined. The second question (on characteristics) needs additional definition (e.g., how is “effective” defined?). Consider using PICOS as a guideline to define the question. Additionally, because the second question is not adequately addressed (despite noting that the literature is too limited to address it), I suggest either focusing on only the first question, or expanding the discussion to include more information on the second question.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.