

'Turning 30' transitions: Generation Y hits quarter-life

Sheila Panchal & Ellen Jackson

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This paper shares a research-based model of a significant life transition experienced by individuals in their late 20s and early 30s, termed a 'turning 30' transition. It reviews psychological and social drivers of this transition for today's generation (commonly known as Generation Y), and explores a range of emotional and behavioural outcomes. A coaching model is presented, which is designed to support coaches and therapists working with individuals in this age group. It is derived from positive and coaching psychology, and has been applied in individual and organisational contexts.

Keywords: Transitions, lifespan development, coaching, positive psychology, quarter-life, Generation Y.

Aims

The aim of this paper is to support coaches who may be working with clients in their late 20s and early 30s. We will do this by firstly sharing a research-based model of the life transition that individuals may experience around 30. This has been referenced as the 'quarter-life crisis' in popular literature, and we use the term 'turning 30' transition. Secondly, we share a coaching model to assist coaches in supporting clients through these transitions.

Those currently in their late 20s and early 30s fall into what is popularly known as Generation Y (e.g. Eisner, 2005). A review of the adult development literature found that many existing models were developed for the Baby Boomer generation (e.g. Levinson, 1986) so there is a need to expand understanding to account for generational influences. In addition, much existing research focuses on the teenage years or the mid-life crisis (e.g. Gething *et al.*, 1991), as such 'turning 30' merits attention.

Model of 'turning 30' transitions

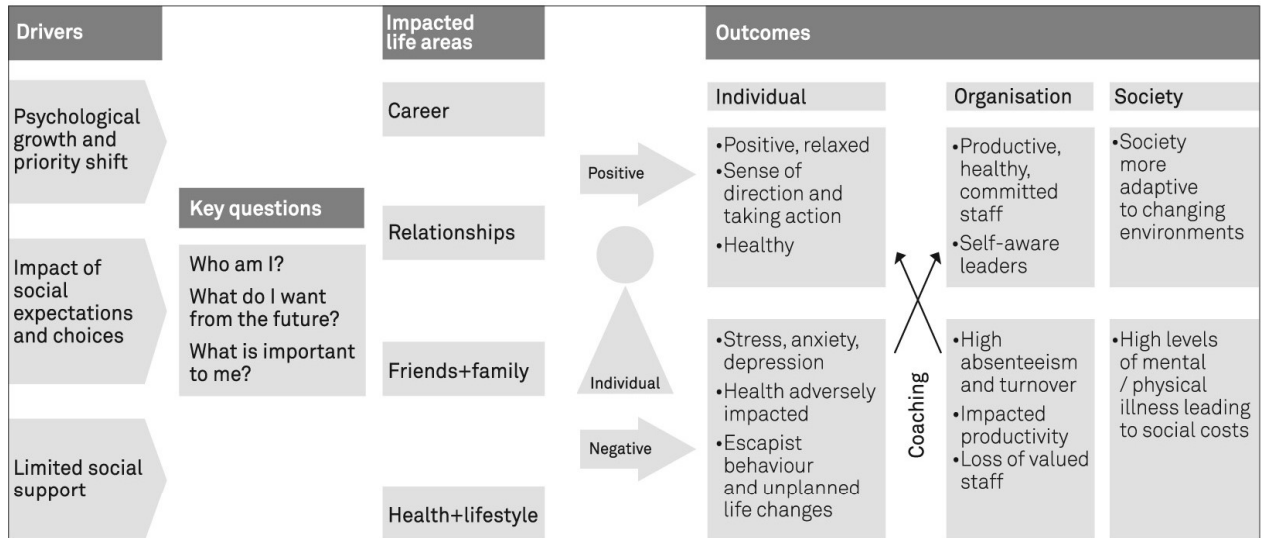
A model was developed based on data from the following source (see Figure 1):

- Self-report questionnaires completed by 40 individuals, aged 25 to 33.
- Qualitative data from coaching clients within the late 20s and early 30s age group.
- Literature review (adult development, coaching psychology, positive psychology).

'Turning 30' as a developmental transition

The established adult development literature points to a transition point around the age of 30 (e.g. Levinson, 1978; Sheehy, 1976). Levinson indicates that adulthood consists of alternating periods of stability and transition. Stability represents consolidation (focusing on daily needs and working towards goals) and transition is a time of re-examination and assessment. The early 20s are described as an initial stable phase when an individual establishes their first adult 'life structure'. Individuals start to work, develop relationships and find their feet as adults. As 30 approaches, transition begins. Life

Figure 1: 'Turning 30' transitions.



choices made to date are re-evaluated in the light of the future. Decisions made in the early 20s may not fit anymore. It is a time when questions about personal identity lead to a deeper sense of self. Changes are made in preparation for the second adult 'life structure' in the early 30s where deeper commitments to work and relationships tend to be made, and there is a greater self-understanding and value. Our data suggests that during the 'turning 30' transition some individuals focus on the future for the first time in their lives. There can be a sense of being 'in limbo' between a familiar past and an uncertain future, which can feel unsettling.

'In my early 20s I didn't feel any pressure to settle down to a career and a steady home life. I loved my life and happily travelled. Now, in my late 20s, I'm a bit anxious about getting older, without savings, a decent job and not much consideration for my future.'

Gould (1978) states that between 28 and 34 individuals 'open up to what's inside'. They face up to the false assumption that life is simple and controllable. People start to think about what they do, and why. There is a need to find a sense of purpose, to under-

stand values, to be confident and to trust one's own judgement. There is a search for a sense of self.

'I feel like I got lost in my 20s. I spent all my time running away from the pressure of expectation, chasing a hedonistic lifestyle of drinking and socialising. I guess I realised that it can't go on forever. I needed to face up to my personal responsibilities and this meant I had to get to know myself again, to establish a sense of myself as an adult. Am I the same person as I was when I left university? Do I want the same things? I don't know yet. They're tough questions.'

Social pressures

Our research implies that the 'turning 30' transition is even more pronounced in the current generation. Social changes have contributed to this, leading to more choice, higher expectations and less social support than in the past.

More choice

Today's 20-something's are commonly referred to as Generation Y. They have far greater life choices than previous generations with the advent of world travel, the

*Italicised quotes are qualitative data, from questionnaires or coaching clients.

internet and far greater social mobility than ever before. A positive outcome of greater choice is greater opportunity. However, choice can bring pressure. Schwartz (2003) states that choice overload can lead to questioning of decisions even before they are made, create unrealistically high expectations, and promote self-blame for any failures. So when making decisions about their place in society during the 'turning 30' transition, people can become paralysed by the challenge of finding the right and best answer amongst endless options.

I guess I'm going through some strange time where something doesn't feel right - I can't quite put my finger on it. I try and think about what I can do and it almost makes it worse - I could become a scuba diving instructor in Thailand, I could take up sculpting full time, I could open up a tea-shop in the Lake District. The options really are endless and there's nothing stopping me from doing any of those things. It's driving me crazy just thinking about it and I'm not getting anywhere.'

Greater expectations

In addition there are greater expectations placed on today's generation than ever before. Media and celebrity culture demonstrate that fame and wealth is on offer and there is nothing stopping individuals having it all from a young age. Seligman (2003) talks about the 'hedonic treadmill' promoted by consumer culture, which means that people are continually striving for more. Our research suggests that expectations also come from parents who tend to measure their children by a life gauge appropriate to Baby Boomers as opposed to Generation Y. Therefore, they expect a steady job, marriage and children as 30 approaches. Added to this are expectations from peers, who have chosen particular routes in life and are seeking confirmation by encouraging others to follow.

Less social support

The breakdown of many traditional support networks, such as religion, community and

extended families can affect how people feel at this age. Information and communications technology have widened the communities to which we can be part of but reduced the depth of commitment that we feel towards or from those networks (Gergen, 1991). Those experiencing the 'turning 30' transition are often left to deal with their personal challenges without the emotional and practical support that they need. Our data showed that friendship groups can also become more fragmented at this age, as people travel and couple up. The collective lifestyle of college or the early 20s disperses and friends can be less accessible.

Emotional and behavioural responses

Research participants reported a range of feelings and behaviours during their 'turning 30' transitions. Some manage their transitions in a positive and adaptive way. Others can commonly feel 'out of control' or that 'things don't feel quite right'. The emotional experience can range from a mild sense of confusion to more serious anxiety or depression. The more serious emotional responses can be caused by excessive rumination either individually or with friends who share similar feelings.

Behavioural responses are focused on escape strategies such as unplanned, significant life change or avoidance behaviour. Individuals reported leaving jobs or relationships in an attempt to fulfil the need to make change in their lives. Travelling is another common response. Increased drug and alcohol use provide a way to escape from the difficult questions that individuals are beginning to ask themselves about their identity and future. Alternative behaviours include making significant life decisions and commitments due to perceived time pressures, such as marriage or career acceleration.

Specific challenges

Thematic analysis of our data highlighted that there are some common sources of pressure that arise during 'turning 30' transitions, as summarised below:

Career

- *Career change.* People tend to review their careers and decide that they need to settle on a path that they are happy with. This can be challenging if they have committed the last 10 years to one path and now want to switch.
- *Work-life balance.* People can find that they are devoting their lives to work as they climb the corporate ladder and struggle to juggle other priorities in their lives.
- *Career progress.* Individuals can find themselves 'stuck' at a certain level and keen to move forwards within their profession or organisation. A desire to raise status or earn more money can create a sense of urgency.

Relationships

- *Searching for a partner.* Those who are single may start focusing on finding a partner. Their single status can become a source of concern as others 'settle down'. This can be enhanced for women, who become increasingly aware of their biological clock.
- *Current relationships.* These are reviewed for long-term potential rather than right for now.
- *Break-ups.* Relationships may end as individuals take stock and decide that their current partner does not have a place in their future.
- *Preparing for commitment.* First time co-habitation, buying property as a couple and marriage are common life events. With them come questions about commitment as individuals grapple with the challenges of balancing intimacy with independence.

Friends and family

- *Changing relationship with parents.* Parents are getting older and there can be greater concern about their health and emphasis on taking care of them. It can be time to redefine relationships with parents, moving from parent-child to more equal friendships.

- *Parenthood.* Many become, or consider, parenthood, which signifies emotional and lifestyle changes.
- *Friends moving on.* For many there is a change in social structures, as friends take different directions with their lives or people move to different places. There can be a risk of social isolation.
- *Prioritising relationships.* Others can find themselves struggling with the demands of too many friendships and acquaintances that they have gathered during their 20s.
- *Fitting in with partner's friends.* Within serious relationships individuals face the challenges of combining their social structures with that of their partners.

Health and lifestyle

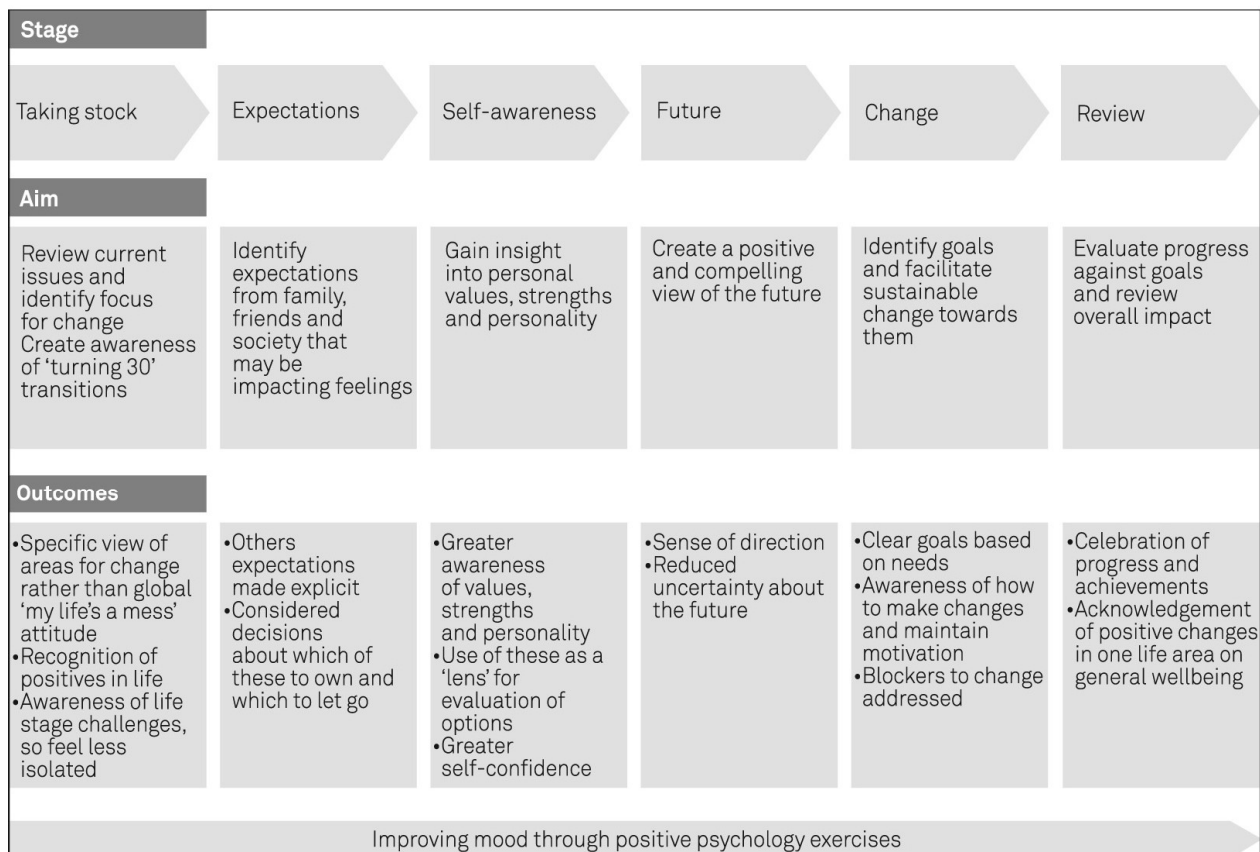
- *Leisure time.* Social and leisure patterns established in the early 20s may no longer be engaging.
- *Taking care of physical health.* Signs of ageing become evident for the first time and people start to take their health seriously.
- *Taking care of emotional health.* For some, the uncertainty of the 'turning 30' transition can lead to more serious emotional problems.

Our research demonstrated that, for many, the 'turning 30' transition is an opportunity for development and growth. It is a time to review the past and set the foundations for the future. It can be a smooth and positive transition. For others, it can be a challenging time with negative behavioural and emotional consequences.

Coaching model

Based on the above findings about the nature of 'turning 30' transitions, a coaching model was developed (see Figure 2). This drew from the solution-focused coaching approach (e.g. Grant & Greene, 2004) and perspectives from positive psychology (Seligman, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Although many elements of this

Figure 2: 'Turning 30' transitions: Coaching model.



coaching model would apply to all age groups, there are aspects that are more pertinent to those experiencing a 'turning 30' transition. The identification of various expectations coming from different sources is important, given the external pressures that contribute to this transition. Spending time creating a vision for the future is also of particular relevance, as 'future' can be a new concept for many, and one that provokes anxiety. Also, for today's generation, self-awareness is more necessary than ever before so they are able to make effective choices from the sea of options available to them in all areas of life.

The coaching model has been published as a self-coaching book (Panchal & Jackson, 2005), and utilised with clients in this age group, with positive outcomes. For coaches and therapists working with individuals in their 20s and 30s, it provides a framework for understanding their context, and suggestions for ways to work with them.

Organisations can benefit from considering how to support their Generation Y individuals. By considering the needs and values of younger workers they are creating a competitive advantage in the war for talent. Through educating their top talent about transitions, organisations can prevent potential derailment and encourage the retention of their future leaders. The coaching model has been applied in small group-coaching workshops with high potentials. These sessions encourage greater self-knowledge and a positive negotiation of the quarter-life crossroads.

Conclusion

The current study provides some initial conclusions about 'turning 30' transitions, and impetus for further research. It suggests that the late 20s and early 30s are a time of reflection and change. There is an opportunity for positive growth and development. However, there is also risk of psychological

ill-health. An understanding of 'turning 30' issues can assist psychologists working as coaches and therapists with this age group. In addition, organisations whose workforce falls into this age bracket could benefit from offering structured coaching support to their employees.

Correspondence

Sheila Panchal

Quarterlifers,

28 Dawkin Court,

Gloucester Road,

London NW1 7BG.

Tel: +44 (0)7739 806782

E-mail: contact@quarterlifers.co.uk

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