

Life Coaching and Counselling

Making Connections

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Abstract

Our aim was to ascertain whether there were any unique aspects of life coaching which could inform counselling and how our counselling skills might inform any extension of our practice into coaching. We interviewed eight Christchurch life coach practitioners and researched available literature and material on the Internet. We discovered life coaching has close affinities with the forward-looking, goal-centred emphases of brief solution-focused counselling, with added emphasis on explicit psychoeducation and the client's motivation and practice of skills to bring about change. We note these emphases are already a strong aspect of many counsellors taking clients through specialist programmes. We highlight coaching's emphasis on giving advice and challenges, and how coaching practitioners counteract risks for highly distressed clients by emphasising negotiated boundaries of responsibility, transparency of process and ascertaining limits and appropriateness of approaches. We conclude that counselling and life coaching have much in common.

Reasons for studying life coaching

Life coaching is a fast-expanding field. To illustrate the abundance of coaching books available, a search for 'life coaching' on the Amazon website came up with 29,252 results as at March 2005. Almost one quarter of therapists have transitioned to coaching in the US (Gooding, 2003) and it is estimated there are 10,000 full and part time coaches in the UK (Deane, 2001). A perusal of advertising and other publicity suggests that there is a similar trend in New Zealand, as did the Documentary New Zealand television programme *Get a Life Coach* (Gibson Group, 2005). Many practitioners are moving into the coaching field from counselling or using coaching to augment their counselling practice. Of the eight Christchurch life coach practitioners whom we interviewed five had a background in counselling.

Furthermore, the possible matching of particular approaches with particular clients, and their concerns, is an important cutting edge in counselling research (Hill, 2001; Lambert & Ogles, 2004; McLeod, 2003; Shadish & Balswin, 2002; Wampold,

2001). Different clients may benefit from a variety of approaches and in this regard knowledge of life coaching could enhance the repertoire of any counsellor.

Our research method

From the Christchurch Yellow Pages we selected a sample of eight life coaches, aiming for a balance of genders and coaching foci. Two of our interviewees are also involved in training life coaches and most had at least several years of coaching experience. Some had a focus on business coaching, others on such issues as life balance and spirituality, although most stressed a holistic approach. Our questions focused on such issues as background, training and motivation, approach and process, use of the Internet and written resources, such practicalities as number, length, frequency and cost of sessions, marketing, incorporation of values, frustrations and satisfactions, distinctions and connections with counselling. We also attended a meeting of the Canterbury Coach Network and extensively researched both published and Internet resources.

Basic findings

Our focus was mainly on those aspects of life coaching that might enhance our work as counsellors. In brief, our key findings regarding the background and practicalities of life coaching revealed that most of the coaches we interviewed took the role seriously, had university degrees and counselling experience, and had undertaken coaching training elsewhere in the country and overseas, sometimes using telephone or Internet conferencing. Their fees for coaching were in the \$60–130 range for hour-long sessions (\$80 being the average fee) and more for commercial organisations. One had built his practice initially on a WINZ contract helping clients back into paid employment, and another provided educational and motivational learning over the Internet for a tertiary education provider. Six of the eight interviewed coaches preferred to work face-to-face at least once a week initially, and two offered a complimentary first session to check client-coach fit. Later sessions could become fortnightly or monthly, and in some cases over the phone or Internet.

Similarities and differences between coaching and counselling

There are strong connections and overlap across the wide continuum of both counselling and coaching models. Interviews with our eight Christchurch life coaches confirmed that they, like counsellors, have definite personal preferences for particular techniques and styles, and these largely reflect their background awareness and training in particular counselling modalities.

However, despite such individual differences, and in line with the ‘common factors’ movement in therapy generally, trends in both fields indicate a merging and narrowing in a similar direction (Campbell, 2001; Grant, 2001; Jackson & McKergow, 2002; Williams & Davis, 2002). Key to these trends is that both counselling and life coaching put an emphasis on relationship with the client, active process, being forward-looking, clarifying and prioritising specific goals, and highlighting client strengths and achievements to engender hope and motivation. Some counsellors, coaches and clients make the assumption that counselling focuses on the past, coaching on the future, but we would argue on the basis of our research that this is far too simplistic a polarity. Nevertheless, counsellors with a background in such modalities as psychoanalysis may feel that life coaching develops only a superficial awareness in clients of the past cause of problems and that this may limit future progress (Carroll, 2003; Channer, 2003; Pointon, 2003).

The key area of subtle variations between most counselling and most coaching that emerged from our research is the degree, transparency, specificity and expression of educational and motivational components. This stems from life coaching’s blurred history, which incorporates sports coaching, management training, a cognitive behavioural component and a systemic or constructionist perspective. Coaching initially thrived with clients who had begun a business enterprise or been promoted into a position such as management in which they felt they would profit from outside stimulus and enhancement. Within such contained fields, where there is research-based practice, coaches have established rationales for clarifying and extending appreciation of when, how and why making suggestions, challenging and self-disclosure might be appropriately incorporated into the coaching process, more than might usually occur in generic counselling. Yet in all this, it should be emphasised that empirical research into life coaching, other than case studies, is still ‘at a formative stage’ (Grant, 2001, p. 20), and largely draws on research into counselling interventions. And again to highlight the continuum, life coaching is more generic than the original career or business coaching, and counsellors taking clients through specialist programmes (dealing with issues such as relationships, anxiety and anger management) are also likely to have a strong emphasis on education and motivation of the client.

Emphases of life coaching

Rather than set up a simple dichotomy between counselling and coaching, our research suggests it is more valid and useful to highlight key assumptions, emphases and goals of life coaching, and observe how they chime more closely with some modalities of counselling than with others. Each of these aspects of coaching led the

client in a particular direction and, though discussed separately, should be seen as working together in a coherent process.

1. Past to future

Coaching puts particular emphasis on shifting focus from the past problem to the desired future, and thereby on the need and methods of change. A counselling model such as brief solution-focused counselling has a similar forward-looking focus (Campbell, 2001; Grant, 2001; Greene & Grant, 2003; Whitworth et al., 1998; Williams & Davis, 2002) and several practitioners see solution-focused counselling as synonymous with life coaching (Jackson & McKergow, 2002). Anthony Grant, who established the world's first university-based Coaching Psychology Unit at the University of Sydney, puts particular emphasis on using models of change, and making these clear to the client, so as to provide a framework within which to do coaching, particularly for those clients who are resistant to change. He acknowledges the following models as useful: Kurt Lewin's 1947 *Forcefield Analysis*, which can be helpful when issues are confused; Bridges' 1986 *Transition Model of Change*, which is useful when dealing with the emotional aspects of change, and Prochaska and DiClemente's 1986 *Transtheoretical Model of Change*, which is useful when the client is ambivalent about the change process (Greene & Grant, 2003).

2. Victimhood to self-responsibility

A central intention of most counselling is to boost clients' self-efficacy, to help them see beyond 'learned helplessness' and the de-energising trap of victimhood. Models such as person-centred and brief solution-focused counselling emphasise that the counsellor should avoid offering advice because this could potentially reinforce the helpless victim with the counsellor as an 'unhealthy' co-dependent rescuer. But this reluctance to offer suggestions is perhaps also what has helped create the 'gap in the market' where life coaching came into its own as an alternative to counselling. Life coaching retains an awareness of the risks of client dependence, but because there is *both* increased offering of advice *and* increased challenging of the client to assess such advice, the two tend to balance each other out in taking the client beyond a sense of victimhood.

3. Distress to hope

Because of this 'more robust' approach in coaching (Grant, 2001, p. 5), it is particularly appropriate for clients who are able to retain self-responsibility and assertion, and are not so distressed as to be vulnerable to inappropriate suggestions (Grant, 2001; Peltier, 2001). Life coaches are likely to be particularly transparent and explicit

in challenging clients (see ‘provocative’ or ‘powerful’ questions in the section below on particular strategies) because ‘coaching assumes ... that clients are capable of expressing and handling their emotions’ (Heron, 2001, p. 4). Indeed, enhancing self-assertion and emphasising self-responsibility seem to be prime generic goals of life coaching.

Perhaps it is because this emphasis is openly acknowledged from the outset that the coach can similarly be more ‘provocative’ (Leonard, 1998) in his or her helping style. Some life coaches spell out the importance of self-responsibility in a written contract signed by both (or all) parties before the life coaching begins (see Williams & Davis, 2002).

However, on closer inspection, apparent differences in client distress and its possible effect on client self-responsibility and motivation may be more about language, labelling and marketing than actual affect. Most of our interviewees reported that men in the ‘professions’ seem to prefer a term like ‘executive coaching’ to counselling because it suggests ‘skill enhancement’ rather than ‘a need to overcome inadequacy’. Such an attitude may predispose clients to being proactive towards hope and change, and as such coaches reinforce, encourage and work with this.

4. Coping to maximising

The coaches we interviewed reported that clients are often still at the stage of blaming, ‘catastrophising’ and other negative thinking and these mental habits need to be challenged or reframed before a focus on the future and change can begin. Grant and Greene (2004, pp. 127–45) stress that coaching can transform ANT’s (Automatic Negative Thoughts) into PET’s (Performance Enhancing Thoughts) and this clearly has links with cognitive behavioural therapy.

Coaching is particularly appropriate for those clients who want to move beyond simply coping and using what they already know, and instead want to maximise the potential in both their selves and their use of community resources to enhance progress well beyond feeling stuck. Thomas Leonard, arguably the founder and most renowned practitioner of life coaching, and originator of the two most popular coaching sites on the Internet (<http://www.coachville.com> and <http://www.coachinc.com/CoachU>), suggests coaches aim to ‘elicit greatness’ by asking ‘what is in the way of greatness in this area?’

5. ‘Stuckness’ to energy

The Coachville website encourages life coaches to introduce possibilities with such energy, enthusiasm and delight that this becomes infectious for the client. It advises coaches that ‘we sell our energy, wisdom and enthusiasm’. The ‘trick’ is that the coach

is ‘responsible for how you are heard, not just for what you say’ and should ensure that the client sees suggestions as further possibilities to consider and not as certainties. In other words the coach ‘navigates via curiosity’, not by assumed expertise. To quote the International Coach Federation:

A coach relates to the client as a partner. A coach does not relate to the client from a position of an expert, authority or healer. Coach and client together choose the focus, format and desired outcomes for their work ... Advice, opinions, or suggestions are occasionally offered in coaching. Both parties understand that the client is free to accept or decline what is offered and takes the ultimate responsibility for action. (Heron, 2001, pp. 152–53)

In practice this requires a delicate balancing act. Coachville warns ‘points off for adding positive spin, responding to something that wasn’t said, irrelevant comments, pouncing with a solution, trying too hard’. Coachville also cautions ‘points off for off-the-shelf solutions, simple solutions, being absolute’. Suggestions by either life coach or counsellor are tentative possibilities only, used to stir response and responsibility from the client, which thereby adds to the generation of client energy.

6. Ignorance to awareness

To further motivate clients a life coach may ask questions or use inventories to bring into clients’ awareness and consideration what may be draining or blocking their energy, to enhance their initial understanding of problems, location of causes, and to help them clarify and prioritise goals. The client may gain a comprehensive overview, which alerts them to important aspects they might overlook, and legitimises what they may feel embarrassed about otherwise raising.

7. Awareness to knowledge

Crucial in all of this is the degree and way in which the life coach then introduces the psychoeducational component, which might also involve practice or rehearsal to further client progress. Several of our interviewees cautioned that coaches need to ascertain a client’s learning style (visual, verbal, kinetic) and personalise any psychoeducational component to the individual needs of the client. While clients may intellectually approve of a suggestion, they might find it hard to incorporate into their particular personality, lifestyle or relational contexts. In their advice, coaches may simply be revealing an irrelevant personal bias. Steering clients towards bibliotherapy and self-help resources can often be used to augment therapy, but for less literate clients, or those who are still in acute distress, this additional avenue is not always viable.

However, many clients expect and want someone who can help them efficiently locate, or directly provide them with, other suggestions or resources to consider in the form of advice, handouts or suggested reading. An experienced coach is likely to have, and indeed ought to have, more knowledge than clients of possible solutions through comprehensive reading and work with past clients.

Our interviewees suggested that most clients are not only ready and able, but also healthily insistent, on assessing for themselves any suggestions their coach might make. They suggested that for the coach to assume otherwise might strike the client as more patronising than offering any research-based advice.

8. Implicit to explicit

Arguably one of the most contentious contributions that some forms of life coaching make in helping clients is the *explicitness* of the psychoeducational component. Integrated and eclectic counselling models can involve comparatively few, but carefully honed and integrated techniques, which mesh to take the client through complex processes in a seemingly simple way (Hill, 2001; Miller et al., 1997; Wampold, 2001). They can seem simple because the processes are largely *implicit*. It could be argued that such models provide initial or 'default' settings for a counsellor, and as such are comparatively safe, simple and efficient bases for the initial training of counsellors.

But in practice some clients need a more *explicit* process in order to accept and believe a therapeutic change is actually taking place. The life coaching approach offers a particularly open and conscious process towards therapeutic change, which may be preferred by some clients, particularly those wanting more emphasis on cognition and less on feeling or intuition. Coaches often explicitly query, clarify and utilise the client's preferred learning style.

9. Elicitation to complicity

In life coaching the client is encouraged *fulsomely and explicitly* to set the agenda. While offering advice may seem to set up a life coach in an expert role, the open manner and mutual scrutiny then applied to the suggestions mitigates any assumption of expertise.

Similar transparency is evident in life coaches' use of self-disclosure, and it requires a similarly delicate balancing act. 'Disclosure begets disclosure ... raises the level of intimacy and openness, trust and risk-taking ... As well as being genuine, your disclosure needs to be discreet – not going on too long or getting too deep and involved' (Heron, 2001, pp. 143–44).

Both life coaches and counsellors favour the word 'elicit' to describe drawing out the client, rather than imposing suggestions from without. Coaches make this process explicit and then also openly have clients consider ideas from a variety of other sources so that they feel the process remains transparent, complicit and ultimately under their control.

10. Generic to detailed

Thinkers through the ages have reworded variations on the idea that God (or the devil – usage alternates) is in the details. Life coaching opens a particularly detailed consideration of how the client's personal circumstance might be improved by generic knowledge as regards their specific issue, 'memes' that can then be adapted by clients to their particular circumstance. Proverbs that seem to contradict, such as 'look before you leap' and 'he who hesitates is lost', can sharpen a client's thinking about their particular circumstance and an appropriate response. Coaches help the client in both the suggestion and adaptation of these memes to their concerns in a context in which this process is both inspiring and safe because it balances motivational enthusiasm with reasoned caution.

As well as small nuggets of advice our coaching interviewees put considerable emphasis on self-help books, referring clients to Mental Health Services, public libraries and various Internet sites, and encouraging them to gather resources for themselves. Coaches also develop and accumulate personally a 'library' of books and brief handouts, which can be given to clients who consider them relevant and helpful.

Using familiar counselling skills in coaching

It became apparent from our research that counsellors wishing to do coaching can draw on familiar techniques from various counselling models. In the initial rapport-building stages techniques such as reflective listening from person-centred counselling are important to help reveal clients to themselves with questions such as 'I wonder if you are aware ...' and feedback such as 'So familiarity and comfort are important to you.'

To clarify future goals, techniques from solution-focused counselling such as the 'miracle question' and 'exceptions to the problem' (de Shazer, 1988) can be useful: 'If you woke up tomorrow and had the solution, what would your life look like? How would you know you had the solution? How would other people know you had the solution? How would you react differently to other people?' (Grant & Greene, 2004, p. 165). Also, 'Have you recently had even a taste of what that would be like? Tell me more about what that was like and how you achieved it?' (de Jong & Berg, 2002).

Gestalt or psychodynamic techniques, such as an exploration of introjections, can be used to alert clients to a dimension that may be holding them back but about which they may have been unaware, such as a lack of self-esteem (McGrath & Walmsley, 2004; Sills et al., 1995; Thompson, 1996). Also in this regard, the 'developmental needs meeting strategy' (Schmidt, 2004) could contribute the attachment-needs dimension, and countering skills, such as those for self-soothing.

Resourcing the client may also involve the Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) technique of 'anchoring' the client in a resource state (McDermott & Jago, 2003; Overdurf & Silverthorn, 2002). Cognitive strategies such as affirmations and countering overly negative beliefs (Peltier, 2001) are important. Also useful are narrative strategies such as labelling or externalising the problem, or reframing interpretation of events into a more positive and motivational 'script' (White & Epston, 1990).

Particular strategies given emphasis in coaching

Life coaches are producing a huge number of specific tools (e.g. client handouts, inventories, slogans, questioning techniques and experiential techniques) which help make their interaction with clients engaging, efficient and productive. Many of these also draw from counselling modalities.

- Pen-and-paper activities: where appropriate clients use cognitive pen-and-paper activities within and between sessions to bring relevant factors into more conscious awareness and controlled consideration. These include the 'wheel of life' exercise (Whitworth et al., 1998, p. 182) to apportion whole life balance, values inventories or card sorts, life maps, genograms, time lines, diagrams and models, and quadrant consideration of pros and cons of making a decision. Webb (1999) also gives examples of solution-focused pen-and-paper interventions.
- Curiosity: as with solution-focused counselling there is the belief that the client has their own answers and it is the coach's job to be curious so that clients learn more about themselves and further build their internal capabilities. Some useful curious questions include: 'How will you know?' 'What will that get you?' 'What would it be like to really love what you do?' 'What will it take to make that happen?' 'What did you learn?' 'What do you see?' (Whitworth et al., 1998, pp. 66–77). Williams and Davis (2002) suggest being curious should be non-judgemental, with detachment from the outcomes. The coach should join their clients' adventure of self-discovery and stay out of the way as clients uncover their own solutions.
- 'Value-added coaching': this was exemplified by Leonard in a training session available on the Coachville website. He suggested that 'when the client can not see the forest for the trees and they really want to be on the beach' then this is a time

to comment ‘I hear what you are going after but I wonder why you are not going for this as well.’ This expands their thinking in a gentle, light, curious way.

- ‘Wisdom pots’: Leonard (ibid.) talks about coaches building up personal ‘wisdom pots’ of situational wisdom, generic solutions and an intuitive sense of their relevance and application for particular clients, and memorable phrasing of them, and he believes that over time these will increase the intelligence of coaching worldwide. During a role-play he shows this when working with a woman who had struggled with weight issues all her life and had not lost weight. He suggests if she had been working on it for a lifetime it was time to give up (change the doing!). Perhaps she has become addicted to the struggle (Leonard, ibid.).
- ‘Provocative’ or ‘powerful’ questions: with less distressed clients Leonard (ibid.) suggests using ‘provocative’ or ‘powerful’ questions and statements, to foster transparency, speed progress and evoke clarity, action, insight or commitment. These include: ‘What do you think is the real truth here?’ ‘I sense there’s something more.’ ‘What do you want?’ ‘What does that cost you?’ ‘What are you doing about that problem?’
- Developing intuition: both coaches and counsellors can become highly sensitive to the client’s unstated thoughts and feelings. They can comment, ‘I have a sense ...’ ‘Can I check something out with you ...’ ‘I wonder if ...’ ‘See how this fits.’ Greene and Grant (2003, p. 30) suggest ‘intuition is simply automatic, unconscious access to information that we have acquired over time’.
- Developing a holistic vision and the spiritual dimension: there is a growing trend in life coaching towards emphasising work/life balance, emotional intelligence, values prioritising (e.g. Hartley, 1999) and acknowledging the importance of the spiritual dimension. Spirituality may be as simple as aiming to live in the moment. For example, the Diploma of Transformational Life Coaching at Nature Care College, Sydney claims to address ‘the needs and longings of the whole person, goals at a deeper level – in mind, body and particularly soul’ (<http://www.nature-care.com.au>).
- Body and energy work: bodywork is used in some coaching approaches to acknowledge the holistic, in particular that we tend to hold onto thoughts and feelings in our body. Examples of bodywork that bring the unconscious into the conscious and shift blocks include Reiki, Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique, Gendlin’s Focusing, Hellerwork and acupuncture. One approach, called MetaCoaching, combines NLP’s communication model for running the brain and neuro-semantic, which involves a cognitive behavioural approach to translating ideas and meanings into body/muscle memory (Hall & Duval, 2004).

- Develop SMART goals: Greene and Grant (2003, p. 61) add new meaning to SMART goals, with the 'S' including Specific and Stretching, suggesting that 'difficult goals lead to greater attainment'; M = Measureable; A including Achievable and Attractive, suggesting that 'if we don't want it, we're unlikely to put in sustained effort'; R = Realistic, and T = Time Framed.
- Create motivation: in Latin the words for 'motivation' and 'movement' are linked (Grant & Greene, 2004, p. 100). Taking action, even one step, creates motivation and begins change. Getting some commitment early in the process changes the dynamic, with clients realising that they have responsibility in the process, but the coach also needs to know when to let go of challenge, remembering the process is best client-led. Scaling questions can be used to monitor and enhance progress, motivation and confidence. Clearly motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 1991) is a form of counselling that has a similar emphasis.
- Written communication, such as agreement or weekly preparation forms, evaluations, a detailed weekly letter of compliments, the commitments for the next week and challenges to consider for the future, can be motivating. Being challenged gives possibilities and exceptions to build on, with the coach in a motivating role. Knowing someone is monitoring progress encourages the client to do more and helps bring them back on track should they relapse.

For other useful tools see Whitworth et al. (1998) and Williams and Davis (2002). These tools include: asking permission; bottom-lining; brainstorming; celebrating; championing; clearing; daily habits-tracking logs; dancing in the moment; designing the alliance; forwarding the action; highlighting self-management and self-care; holding the client's agenda; holding the focus; identifying 'gremlins' (which protect the client but also maintain the problem); intruding/taking charge with 'hard truths'; irritation inventories; meta-view; reality scales; requesting; stressing accountability and acknowledgement; values clarification and visioning.

Will incorporation of coaching techniques benefit clients?

Simply by adding a term like 'life coaching' to their signage or advertising could increase a counsellor's catchment of clients without significantly altering their actual practice. However, a distinction between coaching and counselling should at least accentuate the importance of a counsellor gauging, acknowledging and altering their style for clients who may come primarily (or initially) to seek catharsis or support, and those who more fully expect to be challenged to learn new skills and make a conscious effort to change.

In some cases reassurance and assisting clients to a deepened understanding of where they currently are at may be sufficient to prompt change. Other clients may benefit from focusing on future goals, exceptions to the problem, reframing and open-ended challenges to do something different. Other clients may want and benefit from exploration of explicit suggestions, challenges and self-disclosure from the counsellor. Fortunately, establishing and building rapport, while clarifying goals and building hope, remain initial emphases of most forms of counselling and life coaching.

Duncan et al. (1997, 2004), from their meta-analysis of research, have argued that therapy is most effective when it works with the client's personal notion of change. One possible way of gauging this notion might be the 'Session Rating Scale' (Duncan et al., 2004) which clients fill out at the end of each session. This could provide the occasion and means whereby a counsellor can explore with clients how their counselling style might be adjusted to better meet a client's particular needs and expectations, and how these may change from one session to the next in terms of the counsellor's incorporation of psychoeducation, challenging or self-disclosure.

There is an interesting dimension to why it might be timely to have life coaching techniques and style as part of a counselling repertoire. It is becoming increasingly apparent that Dr Phil (<http://www.drphil.com>), initially through his television programme and now also through his Internet site, is profoundly influencing many clients' expectation as to what counselling can, is, or ought to be. His educational and motivational emphasis has much in common with the attitudes, techniques and manner of life coaching, in particular the use of challenges, goals and education. Because he is widely watched his approach is becoming incorporated into many people's notion of change and they may come to counselling expecting a similar emphasis on goals, challenges and psychoeducation.

Conclusion

In our interviews with eight Christchurch life coach practitioners, and research of published literature and the extensive material available on the Internet, we discovered many affinities with recent modalities of counselling. The popularity of life coaching, and of Dr Phil whose approach has affinities with life coaching, suggest that many counsellors might find it stimulating and timely to include emphases from coaching in their repertoire, provided the client is informed and sees it as appropriate. We found making connections with life coaches, and an exploration of coaching skills and resources, has enhanced our practice, opening us to further possibilities in helping clients.

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Useful websites

<http://www.amazon.com>

<http://www.coachfederation.com> Site of International Coach Federation (ICF).

<http://www.coachinc.com/Coach U>

<http://www.coachville.com> Coachville offers training in coaching via e-training and teleclasses. Free membership.

<http://www.drphil.com>

<http://www.holisticdevelopment.org.nz> Patricia Greenhough, HNLP Life Coach, Christchurch.

<http://www.naturecare.com.au>