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Mindfulness in coaching: being the observer

Article

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Mindfulness in Coaching: Techniques: Being the observer

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Abstract

This short article focuses on a specific technique: Being the observer. The paper is part of a wider series of techniques papers on mindfulness coaching published in *The Coaching Psychologist*. The paper offers a short description of the process and when this technique may be most helpful within a coaching conversation. It builds on the papers in the previous editions of TCP, which have briefly reviewed the science and potential for mindfulness approaches in coaching and other techniques.

As a technique paper, I have deliberately kept the discussion short, but for those interested in the wider evidence behind the application of mindfulness, a more detailed review is included in earlier papers, as well as other techniques which can be used alongside attitude choice (Passmore, 20171a, 2017b and 2017c, 2018). For a comprehensive review, readers may wish to review Michael Cavanagh, and Gordon Spence's critical review of the mindfulness literature (Cavanagh& Spence, 2013)

Key words: Mindfulness coaching, meditation, coaching psychology.

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Introduction

This paper is one of a series of papers focusing on mindfulness techniques that can be used by coaches with their clients. In this paper the focus is on helping clients to observe themselves as they engage with others during their day.

Being the observer

Much of our life is spent rushing between one task and the next. We are so engaged in the process we rarely take time to observe what is happening around us, or to observe our selves. When things become difficult we can find ourselves worrying about past or future events, ruminating about such events and how we dealt with them or might deal with them.

This exercise is designed to be used with coaching clients to help them observe their behaviour, their thoughts and their feelings. By doing so we are encouraging our coachees to become more self-aware. The exercise is particularly useful for coachees when they perceive something has gone wrong, or has gone not as they would have liked. By helping our clients stepping out from their thought stream, of rumination about a past event, we can help our coachees to take a more objective perspective of the events, observe their own thoughts and feelings, and make choices about thought, feelings and behaviors which may be more helpful.

As with most of these exercises they can be taught, or shared with coachees quickly and used as homework or activities between sessions, with the following coaching session used to explore observations, insights and learning.

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Exercise: Be the Observer

Rumination is a common human trait. It can happen especially when the client is upset about something that has happened or a conversation that went wrong. When the client over identifies with their thinking they can become anxious and stressed. The exercise is aimed to help clients o acknowledge that they are not their thoughts, and their thoughts are are not the truth.

This is useful because:

- It can create some space between the clients' thoughts and their identity
- It can help them to spot when and how often they are ruminating
- It can help them learn a different approach to their thinking, reducing criticism and increasing acceptance.

Here is what you do:

- If a coachee talks about an issue that has been troubling them, and the thought or anxiety if reoccurring, invite them to notice when this thought occurs.
- When it does suggest they find a place which is quiet space
- Mute their phone and silence anything that may disturb them
- Invite them to take 10 minutes for the mindfulness task.
- Invite them to take a few breaths and observe their body as they sit in the chair
- Invite them to be aware of any sensitive sin their body, to observe them not not to judge such sensations.
- Next invite them to imagine they are in a movie theatre and are watching their thoughts as if they were a movie
- Help them to see their thoughts as separate as opposed to being them, and to simply watching the 'movie'
- If the movie gets too difficult for you, they can turn their attention back to your breath
- If not, after taking a few breaths they should return to the 'movie'
- Watch the 'movie' without analyzing or judging. If the thought itself is a judgment simply notice this and let it be
- Ask the coachee if as they have sat with the 'movie', did it change
- Ask the client if these thoughts are them or if there is an alternative 'movie' about the same story which they could 'play' What would this be?.
- Help them to recognize that our thoughts are not the truth, but a subjective experience.

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Conclusion

This technique helps to bring coachees' awareness to their thoughts and helps them to both gain greater distance from these ruminations and secondly to see that alternatives thoughts or interpretations of events are possible. My experience of using this is that coachees often find three or four different endings to their movies, and this multiple endings helps develop more effective acceptance of stressful events by clients.

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