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Article

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Compassion-focused perceptual positions

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Abstract

This article focuses on the perceptual position (or ‘empty chair’) technique adapted to fit the aims of compassion-focused coaching. I will briefly review the key principles of the compassion-focused approach and discuss why and how this technique can be used in coaching practice.

Key words: Compassion-focused coaching, self-compassion, perceptual positions, critical self-talk, coaching psychology.

Compassion-focused coaching

The compassion-focused approach, which is based on how our brain evolved, aims to strengthen the emotional resilience we need to thrive and function optimally. Compassion can be defined as an awareness of suffering in oneself and others with a desire to relieve it (see Gilbert, 2009; Lazarus, 1991; Neff, 2003; Pommier, 2010). Thus, despite misconceptions, it implies an intention to take positive action, which goes beyond the emotional response of empathy.

The compassion-focused approach was originally developed as a therapy to help clients manage threat emotions like shame, guilt and fear that may affect their mental health (Gilbert, 2014), by supporting clients to engage in constructive self-talk by reframing rash self-criticism. At the heart of this approach is compassionate mind training (Gilbert, 2009; 2014), which involves the recognition of how our ‘tricky’ brain makes sense of emotions, cognitions and motivations (Gilbert, 2014). Ultimately, the compassion-focused approach aims to develop clients’ compassionate mind so that they can manage unhelpful emotions and thoughts independently. There is evidence that the principles of the compassionate-focused approach are effective even when managed by individuals alone through guided self-help (Sommers-Spijkerman et al. 2018).

In coaching, the compassion-focused approach can be an effective way to help coachees manage their inner critic, rumination, self-monitoring and negative emotions that affect their well-being and ability to take action towards their development (Irons, Palmer and Hall, 2019). Like many other psychology approaches that were first developed for therapeutic settings, compassion-focused must be adjusted to fit the boundaries of coaching. While the techniques are like many already used by coaching psychologists and do not require adjustment, the presenting issue the coachee brings must fit the coaching space. The severity of negative emotions and distress should be taken into consideration by coaching practitioners.

Compassion-focused coaching is a particularly useful approach to help the coachee overcome burdensome self-criticism, for instance, on their performance at work or sports, especially when this self-criticism is not an accurate reflection of their performance (Palmer, 2009). A belief commonly held is that critical self-talk is what drives the improved performance of individuals. However, when

this turns into self-attack and self-bullying, coloured by shame and guilt, it no longer offers any advantage. Instead, it leaves coachees trapped in the past and unable to take action. This kind of self-talk is characterised by (1) a desire to punish and condemn, (2) a focus on deficits, a fear of exposure and often, backward looking, (3) anger, frustration and disappointment and (4) high fears of failure, increasing the likelihood of avoidance and withdrawal.

On the other hand, compassionate self-correction helps individuals to view weaknesses, mistakes or limitations as part of the human condition. By taking away the harsh judgment, it is possible to recognise in these situations an opportunity to take positive actions. This kind of self-talk includes (1) a desire to improve, enhance and grow, (2) forward looking, building on positives – what worked and lessons were learned, (3) encouragement, support and kindness and (4) hope for success, increasing the chances of engagement and action.

The use of compassion-focused techniques helps the coachee to gain perspective and understand the difference between these two kinds of self-talk. It also enhances the coachee's emotional regulation system and the coachee's ability to use their own wisdom to thrive and flourish. Compassion-focused interventions and principles complement well the repertoire of approaches coaching psychologists already use, such as cognitive behavioural, humanistic and positive psychology interventions within their coaching practice.

Understanding the three perceptual positions

In this technique, the coaching psychologist aims to support the coachee to identify self-criticism and its counterproductive nature and develop a compassionate perspective of self. This technique is an adaptation of the Gestalt Therapy technique called 'The Empty Chair' used by Fritz Perls and widely used in therapy and coaching (see 'Perceptual positions' in Alexander, 2016, pp.180). This technique allows the coachee to work through internal conflict using a compassionate approach (this also works for interpersonal conflicts although this is not the focus of this paper).

Compassion-focused interventions and principles help the coachee to see the situation from a compassionate self-correction perspective rather than a purely self-critical, self-attacking one. At the same time, the coachee will become aware of threat-related emotions and associated behaviours. Similar to the two-chair exercise adapted by Kristin Neff (n.d.), the coachee takes the perceptual position of the critic, the criticised and the compassionate observer.

Setting up

When introducing this technique, it is advisable to briefly explain to the coachee that they will role-play three different voices of their internal self as they work on an issue that prompts their harsh inner critic. The coach asks the coachee to think about a topic, or a specific situation, that triggers critical, self-attacking talk.

1st Position

To establish the exercise, the coach places two chairs opposite each other and asks the coachee to sit down in one of the chairs (this technique may also be performed standing up). Once there, the coach asks the coachee to imagine they are their inner critic's voice and are now allowed to express their thoughts and feelings about the situation freely. For example: *you are always making a fool of yourself. You are such a looser.*

Let the coachee talk for as long as they need to until they come to a natural pause (notice their body language and tone of voice). This is called the 1st position, 'the critic'. Once the coachee finishes, the coach indicates they can get up from the chair and should check whether they are ready to continue.

2nd Position

With the coachee sitting at the opposite chair, the coach asks them to imagine they are the part of themselves that is criticised. The coach should encourage the coachee to voice their feelings and thoughts as a consequence of all the disapproval, judgment and criticism received. For example: *you make me feel really ashamed. I feel hurt by these words. I am never good enough.*

Again, let the coachee talk until they get to a natural pause. Notice their tone of voice and body language and how they have changed from the previous position. This is the 2nd position called 'the criticised'. Once the coachee ceases talking, the coach should ask the coachee to stand up and shake that position off their bodies by moving their arms and legs a little.

If the coachee feels they still have something to say in these two first positions, these can be repeated.

3rd Position

The coach then takes the coachee to a different part of the room, where they can both observe the two chairs, and ask them to reflect and comment on the conversation that just took place (between the critic and the criticised). What did they notice in that conversation? The coach may like to encourage the coachee to explore any differences in body language, the tone of voice, feelings and thoughts. This 3rd position is called 'the compassionate observer'.

The coach should also help the compassionate observer to reflect on what might be behind that harsh, and judgemental self-talk, e.g. fear of failure, a past situation where shame was experienced, a message received when growing up. It is also helpful to identify if there is anything the critical-self talk may be trying to communicate to the coachee, e.g. you should be more prepared next time, you know you need time to think before committing to something. Often this can be reframed positively through compassionate self-correction. The compassionate observer should also explore the consequences for the criticised. What are the feelings that self-attack triggers, how helpful (or unhelpful) is that harsh criticism.

The coach should now encourage the compassionate observer to speak to the critic and criticised, to tell them what they notice and to acknowledge the reasons behind criticism and the way it makes the criticised feel (facing each chair). The compassionate observer can now suggest better ways to address the concerns from the critic, using an alternative compassionate self-corrective talk within the principles of self-compassion and the compassionate mind. For example: *I understand you (critic) don't want to fail. I understand your fear that others will criticize you. I can see this talk is hurting you (criticised). I can see it does not help or I suggest it would be easier to address the situation without self-attack. We should unpack what worked and what didn't and find what is in our control and can be changed, etc.*

When the coachee is ready, the coach can invite them to sit down the way they usually do in their sessions to reflect on the exercise. It is important to note that the seating arrangements should be different from the exercise set up of 1st and 2nd position, so it is clear that this is no longer a role-play.

Reflections

The coach invites the coachee as 'themselves' to reflect on what they learned from the experience. Is there any possible change to critical and negative self-talk or to related feelings? What strategies could they consider to manage their inner critic knowing what they know now? What resources and strategies do they need to handle this more effectively? How can they make the compassionate observer voice more prominent? What steps can they take to constructively manage similar issues or situations that may trigger the inner critic in the first place?

If the coachee is ready, the coach can encourage them to consider some actions and strategies to manage their inner critic better in the future.

Conclusions

Building on the principles of the compassion-focused approach (Gilbert, 2009; 2014) and self-compassion (Neff, 2003), this technique can be used as a powerful strategy to help coachees to explore their critical self-talk. It especially focuses on understanding the coachee's harsh critical voice and its subsequent impact. Hence, this technique aims to help the coachee to recognise and strengthen their compassionate voice as an alternative way to deal with troubling issues or difficult situations that can trigger shame, anger and guilt-related emotions.

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