**July 2024 | Issue 51**
For counsellor-coaches and other coaching professionals

# Coaching Today

## The motherhood transition

**'How do we coach clients who are navigating "the forgotten land of the mother"?'**

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FEATURES




**Coaching Today** is the quarterly journal for counsellors and psychotherapists who are retraining and practising as coaches, as well as coaches from a diverse range of backgrounds.

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# Editorial

Diane Parker
**Editor, Coaching Today**

REGULARS



We welcome feedback and comments from our readers. If you have a response to any of the articles published in *Coaching Today*, please contact the Editor at **coachingtoday.editorial@bacp.co.uk**. Please note that your letter may be edited for length.

## In transition

Coaches – does this sound familiar to you?

A client comes to you to share a 'success' story. They have achieved what they set out to do – they have 'done the work' and now they have the job, the career, the position, the relationship, or the lifestyle they wanted. To all intents and purposes, their dreams have come true and to an outsider looking in, they now have everything their heart desires.

And yet… *'Why do I feel so… exhausted/unsettled/dissatisfied/empty/lonely?'* they ask.

It is the nature of transitions that any change, however welcome or desired, involves an element of loss, and in order to progress in one area of life, there must first be a letting go in another. This might be something tangible or physical like a person, a community, a social circle, a job or a home, or it may be something more esoteric, like an idea, a philosophy or an identity. When I hear this from a client (or something along these lines), upon further investigation, it often transpires that whatever has been lost or let go of in the process of growth remains unacknowledged and therefore unmourned. These feelings of dissatisfaction or emptiness are often accompanied by a deep sense of shame – the belief that they *'shouldn't be feeling this way'* – which further increases their sense of isolation.

**It is the nature of transitions that any change, however welcome or desired, involves an element of loss, and in order to progress in one area of life, there must first be a letting go in another**

Our cover feature by Ali Pember explores this complex aspect of transitions in powerful depth, with specific focus on *matrescence*, or the life-changing transition to motherhood. In her article, she captures the ambivalence, guilt and isolation often experienced by her clients, and demonstrates how coaches can support this client group specifically through coaching, looking at societal pressure, idealised notions of motherhood that have been internalised by the client, and the concept of the 'good enough' mother, as defined by child psychologist D.W. Winnicott.[1] As she writes, much of her work with clients involves 'holding space for the contradictory feelings and complex identity shifts that motherhood brings' (p8).

Transitions are also an emergent theme within BACP Coaching, as we say farewell and thank you to Lucy Myers, who is coming to the end of her three-year tenure as Chair of BACP Coaching. As she writes in her final column on p4, her departure and that of other members of the Executive mean that there will soon be opportunities for members of the Coaching division to join the Executive Committee. Do look out for further announcements on our website.

As ever, if you feel called to respond to any of the articles in this issue with one of your own, get in touch with your ideas – I'd love to hear from you.

Until next time… ■

**Diane Parker**
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**REFERENCE**

**1** Winnicott, DW. The child, the family, and the outside world. London: Penguin; 1973.

**Interested in contributing to *Coaching Today*?**

Copy deadlines for the next two issues are **5 November 2024** and **4 February 2025** respectively. Contact the Editor at the email above with your ideas.

OUR ROUND-UP OF THE LATEST EVENTS, NEWS AND RESEARCH

BACP Coaching News

# Message from the Chair

## Advocating through research

Is it a formally recognised sign of ageing when you start to say things like 'Doesn't time fly…'? Either way, I'm smiling as I write this. I can't believe it's been three years since I joined the BACP Coaching division Executive Committee in August 2021, and that it's time to turn in my final column as Chair, complete my tenure as part of the team, and make way for new divisional members to enjoy playing their part in advocating for our field of practice. We will soon have a new Chair and Deputy Chair, who I know have the passion, insight and diversity of perspective to impactfully represent us as a division within and beyond BACP. With the final votes still to be cast at the time of writing, I'll let them introduce themselves and their divisional priorities in our October issue.

### Pause for thought

As we so often see in our work with clients, reaching a milestone gives pause for thought. As the famed American philosopher and psychologist, John Dewey, wrote about the value of reflective practice: 'We do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience.'[1] Dewey believed that our experiences shape us, and when reflective practice is part of learning, then meaning and relevancy is created, which initiates growth and change. As practitioners of both counselling and coaching, facilitating growth and change for others is the bedrock of our work. But one of the things I love most about our profession is that through it, we also continually grow and evolve our understanding of ourselves.

My early columns back in 2021 reflected the reawakening of our world after the COVID-19 pandemic: getting back on a plane and meeting people again, while still wearing facemasks. It seems like yesterday but also a lifetime ago. As the BACP Coaching division, we're proud of the progress we've made since then. Regular readers will remember the part we played in overseeing the final completion and subsequent milestone launch of the BACP Coaching competences. We've connected with colleagues, members and peers in a variety of events and special interest groups across the therapy and coaching communities, to understand the support that our members need most. More recently, as part of our 'advocating for members' strategy, we have been pleased to build on the progress made by commissioning research, alongside the BACP Research team and under the expert guidance of Andrew Reeves from the University of Chester, which aims to develop a working definition of integrated practice.

On that, I must give huge thanks to those who generously gave up their time to contribute to fascinating and insightful group research sessions. At the time of writing, the process of completing a thematic analysis is underway, and we're excited to be planning to share the emerging insights, ahead of publication, in our Working with Coaching online event on Wednesday 4 September. In a series of live and interactive presentations and panel discussions, we'll be exploring the theme of: 'Defining integrated therapy-coaching practice: is this possible, how can it be done, and why do we need to do it anyway?' In addition to highlighting the key research themes, the event aims to offer our members a chance to explore the implications, risks and challenges of these insights for dual-qualified practitioners, and an opportunity to help define the potential direction and focus of any future research we undertake. For more information about the event, see **https://tinyurl.com/2rckfmtf**

> **One of the things I love most about our profession is that through it, we also continually grow and evolve our understanding of ourselves**

### The power of collaboration

When I think about what has provided 'meaning and relevancy' for me personally during my time on the Coaching Executive, two things stand out.

© Rebecca Challis Photography

**Lucy Myers** is Chair of BACP Coaching

The first is the impact that being surrounded by inspiring, warm, honest and challenging (in all the right ways!) people had on my practice. Our meetings facilitated many hours debating the ins and outs of what it means to be dual-qualified, and strongly inspired my confidence in my 'therapeutic coaching' approach with clients – one that combines the solutions-focused energy of coaching with the healing empowerment of psychotherapy. More than that though, I felt supported, encouraged and psychologically safe to 'be me'. Coming from a former career that lacked a significant number of strong female role models over the age of 50, this has been life changing.

The second thing is the energising power of collaboration, not just within BACP and our collective of dual-qualified therapists/counsellors and coaches, but in the wider world beyond. The fact that I've been asked (as Chair) to contribute to panel discussions is, I believe, testament to the impact of the excellent client work that you – our members – are all doing in this space. The power of an integrated approach is being noticed. It was a pleasure to take part in a panel hosted by the European Mentoring and Coaching Council's health coaching Special Interest Group (SIG), 'Is coaching therapeutic?'[2], and I was honoured to join the Association of Executive Coaching (AoEC) to celebrate International Coaching Week and explore 'How coaching complements the caring professions.'[3]

Out of all this, I feel very lucky to have learnt from experts in the fields of clinical and occupational psychology; executive, health, neurodiversity and trauma-informed coaching; hypnotherapy and nutritional therapy; and from specialists in human resources, organisational development and wellbeing professions. In hearing about the client work of each practitioner, it's been wonderful to recognise there's so much more that connects us than separates us. Crucially, one of the key things we all share is a strong belief in ethical and professional practice, working within our fields of competence, and the importance of investing in good supervision. Working together to understand the strengths and qualities of each other (as well as any limitations and boundaries), to exchange new approaches, models and concepts, and to build strong, informed referral networks relevant to our scope of practice, will ultimately help us meet the wide-ranging and complex needs of our clients, in increasingly challenging workplace and community environments.

## Thank you

I can't finish without saying thank you to some incredible BACP folk, who not only work incredibly hard and with relentless passion for the organisation and its members, but are also just lovely, decent, fun people to work alongside. Including (among many others) Jeremy Bacon, Kris Ambler, Anna Kennedy, Rebecca Gibson, Laura Hands, Kylie Vaughan, and Clair Parfrey – thank you so much for the support you've shown BACP Coaching over these last three years. It is massively appreciated. As for the future, with a supportive, engaged, and engaging senior leadership team at the helm, I look forward to cheering on from the sidelines as the Coaching division and its membership continue to strive and thrive. ■


### REFERENCES

**1** Dewey J. Experience and education (1938), New York: Touchstone; 1997.
**2** European Mentoring and Coaching Council. Is coaching therapeutic? EMCC, 16 May 2024 [Online.] https://tinyurl.com/jd4mxuem
**3** Association of Executive Coaching. Exploring how coaching complements the caring professions. [Webinar.] youtube.com 2024; May. https://tinyurl.com/mw968n8u


# BACP Coaching Update

## BACP Coaching Executive update

I want to say a huge thank you to Joanne Wright and Yvonne Inglis who are stepping down after their three-year tenure on the Executive Committee. They have made valuable contributions to the team across a variety of initiatives, but many of you will know them best as hosts of our popular online network events, which have gone from strength to strength under their facilitation. I'm delighted to announce that Steve Davis will be capably stepping into their shoes from September, alongside Claire Hornsby.

All this of course means there'll be several voluntary positions available on our Executive Committee from the autumn onwards. As this column has shown, these positions provide brilliant opportunities to connect with like-minded practitioners, and support the strategic mission of BACP and the Coaching division. Look out for announcements on our website and social media platforms to find out more about how and when you can apply.
**Lucy Myers**

## Network events

**Tuesday 24 September, 6pm to 7pm**
**Location: Online**
**Training as dual practitioners**

The topic of our next online network meeting will be '**Training as dual practitioners**'. This will offer participants an opportunity to share experiences and ideas about the challenges unique to being competent in one approach and a beginner in another.

For more information and to book, see:
**https://tinyurl.com/4shwejec**

# **Meet** the member

## *Melanie Armstrong*

*practises as a coach and mentor in both a private and voluntary capacity. With a background in learning and development (L&D) and organisational development (OD) in further and higher education, Melanie is a qualified coach and mentor from the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) and holds a certificate from Bath Consultancy in the supervision of coaches, mentors and consultants. She trained as a counsellor during 2001 – 2004 and practised bereavement counselling during that time until 2006. Melanie has been an authorised facilitator for the Bridge Pastoral Foundation (www.bridgepastoral.org.uk) since 2018.*

**www.armstrong-consultancy.co.uk**

### How would you describe your journey from therapist to coach (or coach to therapist)?

My journey into counselling began following a turbulent period in my early 30s, when a personal identity issue coincided with the ill-health of a close family member. These two things colliding led me to seek out personal therapy, where I slowly regained my self-confidence and self-belief. Following this life-changing experience, I embarked on a learning journey, which culminated in my being awarded a diploma in person-centred counselling.

While undertaking the diploma involved me doing a lot of work on myself, it opened my eyes to the power of listening, being heard and understood, and the profound significance this has on people's lives. My experience of offering counselling directly was relatively short-lived, due to a family bereavement, and juggling private work while working full time in higher education.

> **I particularly enjoy working holistically with my clients, and bring a balance of content and relational coaching to sessions**

However, in 2004, I attended the annual conference of the Bridge Pastoral Foundation (BPF), which brings a theological perspective into training for psychotherapy, counselling and related helping professions. This led me to joining the Foundation. In BPF, I experience total acceptance of who I am and have experienced life-changing development through small personal growth group sessions.

Meeting each day of the conference with the same group of people is an integral part of these sessions. Working with experienced facilitators, group members are encouraged to explore personal issues, and have the opportunity to explore creatively and work through – at many different levels - current or past experiences that are hindering or limiting their lives and relationships, in a safe, confidential and supportive environment. Group facilitators have daily supervision, and we work within ethical boundaries.

I became a facilitator of the personal growth groups in 2018. In this way, I feel that I have been able to continue my therapeutic work. BPF also offers primal growth and integration courses, which I have also greatly benefitted from. However, my therapeutic learning definitely lives on in my coaching work too, which has spanned over 20 years in the higher education environment. I now have my own private coaching, mentoring and supervision consultancy.

### Do you have a coaching niche?

I have been told by clients that I radiate a sense of calmness and kindness. I don't always feel calm but kindness to others is very important to me. These traits were clearly communicated to me when I retired from my professional work, and I have held on to this humbling feedback ever since. Coaching clients who seek me out are often looking to enhance their confidence, self-belief and increase their general wellbeing to achieve a more optimum work/life balance. I particularly enjoy working holistically with my clients, and bring a balance of content and relational coaching to sessions. What also features strongly in my coaching is my knowledge of supporting people at work with tools for challenges such as managing work/life balance, developing personal effectiveness, and managing and developing mental health and wellbeing.

### How has becoming a coach changed you as a person?

Coaching has changed me as a person in that I believe this is my natural vocation in life. To help

people become the best version of themselves is a privilege, and I value it dearly.

Working as a coach within my original place of employment gave me the opportunity to really hone my skills as both a coach and a mentor. Working with coachees across all levels of an organisation provides stretch and growth, and working beyond my comfort zone enabled me to move from more of a fixed mindset to one of growth (Dweck, 2008).[1] Much of the time, I was working with women as the lead support on a women's leadership programme. I did this by offering continuing professional development (CPD), which included mentoring. My coaching came into this aspect of my work through offering career coaching sessions for unsuccessful applicants, which I found extremely rewarding. To see applicants' confidence re-emerge, and very often be successful in reapplying for the programme, was very affirming for my coaching style.

## Where do you practise?

I practise online and in person, and my base for in-person coaching is by mutual arrangement with my clients. I have a certain reluctance to coach in my client's place of work as it might hamper their learning process. However, if that is my client's preference I will do so, but only if there is a guarantee of a private and uninterrupted space available. I also have to manage my own potential blocks to being the best coach that I can be, and a neutral private space is so important to me. I make decisions about the space I practise in on a case-by-case basis.

## Do you have a typical client?

I don't think that there is any such thing as a typical client; however, the majority of my work seems to centre around women who have either moved into a new role, and/or are looking to progress their career. They have usually experienced a loss of confidence, or perhaps carry a lack of confidence for a range of reasons. For my part, I welcome all clients.

## How would you describe your particular approach to coaching/therapy?

I would say my coaching approach is a blend of business and therapeutic, which gives me the unique ability to support my clients practically and emotionally. Because of my background as an L&D/OD specialist, I also offer a facilitative approach using the cathartic, catalytic and supportive styles, as outlined by social scientist John Heron.[2]

## What's your biggest challenge currently?

My biggest challenge currently is working with my personal experience of ageing. I know that I can still coach competently, but I am challenged with how my body and mind work differently now I'm in my early 60s. I had decided that when I retired professionally, that the next few years would be my time to do with what I wanted, and developing my coaching, mentoring and supervision practice was what I wanted to focus on. I didn't anticipate having to manage the establishment of my consultancy, at the same time as adapting to and accepting my ageing process. I am reminded, of course, of how lucky I am to be able to work at this stage in my life and I hope to do so for a good few more years yet.

**Being a member of BACP Coaching symbolises for me my uniqueness as a coach and enables me to feel part of a particular community of practice**

## What do you feel most proud of having achieved?

I am most proud of being able to say that I am a self-employed coach, mentor and supervisor. I never envisaged having the courage, time and energy to put myself out there in the public domain.

## How do you resource yourself? What do you enjoy in your spare time?

I love spending time with my eight-year-old Border terrier, Laddie, named after my dad's first dog when he was a boy. I also enjoy reading, television, theatre and working in our nearby community garden space.

## What advice would you give therapists interested in coaching?

I would urge therapists to dip their toe in the water and try coaching out for size. It is a natural transition for some, I feel. Being able to work with what is going on underneath the surface for a client, as well as the presenting issue(s) they arrive with, is so significant and offers the potential for transformational growth. To be alongside coachees, and work with them when they are vulnerable at times, as well as moving from dependence to independence, is hugely fulfilling and a true privilege.

## What does being a member of the Coaching division give you?

Being a member of BACP Coaching symbolises for me my uniqueness as a coach and enables me to feel part of a particular community of practice where I am listened to, heard and understood. I regularly come back to the division for my own personal development and as a means of enabling my reflective process during my consultancy work. This might be to get inspiration, to re-affirm my belief in my coaching approach and to satisfy my hunger for learning. ■

### REFERENCES

**1** Dweck C. Mindset. New York: Ballantine Books; 2008.
**2** Heron J. Helping the client: a creative practical guide (5th ed). London: Sage; 2001.

**Get in touch**

If you are a BACP Coaching member and would like to feature in this column, please contact the Editor at: **coachingtoday.editorial@bacp.co.uk**

# Matrescence matters:

## helping clients navigate the motherhood transition

Therapeutic coach **Ali Pember** explains why understanding matrescence (the transition to motherhood) is vital if we are to truly support mothers through coaching

'What do you think?' The question jolted me out of a daydream. After a fractured night's sleep following a transatlantic flight, before sitting through endless PowerPoint slides with graphs measuring 'key performance indicators' outlining the department's strategic direction, perhaps it was inevitable that I had zoned out. The question about what I thought our new 'mission statement' should be was a reasonable one. The problem was that my personal mission had been completely overtaken by the birth of my first child. As I was sitting there, thousands of miles from home, stuffed into a suit, I felt the familiar throb of my breasts engorging with milk. I made an excuse and scuttled off to the bathroom to pump furtively. And then the thought struck me: I was a lactating mammal in a room full of machines and metrics. This was not normal.

It was as surreal a moment as it sounds. Ultimately, this realisation led to me quitting my corporate job. I couldn't live with the sense of incongruence that combining this kind of 'high-powered' career and motherhood demanded of me. Mostly, this was due to an internal shift in my identity and values. But it was also due to the fact that in our society, the roles of 'work' and 'motherhood' are treated as separate and invisible to each other. There is little or no acknowledgement of the enormity of the change women have to accommodate in matrescence (the transition to motherhood).

Since that pivotal moment in a meeting room on the other side of the world, I have spent over 10 years supporting mothers, parents and caregivers as a birth worker, perinatal yoga teacher, mindfulness practitioner, and now as a specialist therapeutic coach.

In this article, I examine how bringing the concept of **matrescence** into the coaching space can have a positive impact on individual outcomes, despite persistent structural barriers for mothers at work and in other domains.[1]

My view is that an understanding of matrescence can help therapists/coaches to:

1. **Normalise feelings:** help clients realise that they are not alone in their experience
2. **Situate distress:** enable clients to see individual issues within a broader context
3. **Enable growth:** empower clients to find their own agency within motherhood.

I will explore each of these in turn.

First, I want to acknowledge that there are limits to this approach. This article describes aspects of a therapeutic coaching process I use with clients who are resourced and able to embark on forward-looking work. Clients who present with trauma or diagnoses within the spectrum of perinatal mood and anxiety disorders (PMADs) will likely require further support from a maternal mental health and trauma specialist. For example, I support clients with birth trauma and severe postpartum depression and anxiety, but this is beyond the scope of what I share here.

## Normalise feelings: help clients realise they are not alone in their experience

*'I just don't know what's happening to me. I mean, I've never been happier on one level, but I feel so trapped and frustrated at the same time.'*

When clients first come to me, they often struggle to articulate the sense of disconnect between what they think they *should* feel and what they *do* feel as mothers. They cannot reconcile their conflicting emotions, and have a deep sense of shame for even daring to suggest their experience of motherhood is not positive and fulfilling.

Karen Kleiman, founder of The Postpartum Stress Centre, refers to the 'constellation of losses' wrought by the transition to motherhood. She goes on to catalogue 'sleep, finances, alone time, her former self, couple time, self-identity, body image, adult conversation, predictability, calmness, spontaneity, freedom, friends, her previous body, career, leisure time, privacy, intimacy, sexuality, confidence, self-esteem, to name a few'.[2] Reading this list sounds catastrophic. In no other area of life would we expect someone to shoulder these losses alone, let alone embrace change of such magnitude without ambivalence. Yet, by expecting mothers to return to work with no supporting 'village', no awareness of matrescence, and nowhere to take their distress, this is exactly what we do.[3]

So, where to begin in coaching clients who are navigating what Siri Hustvedt calls 'the forgotten land of the mother' in modern Western culture?[4] One place to start is by enabling these clients to give voice to the mixed feelings they have about motherhood. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, Rozsika Parker defines *maternal ambivalence* as the 'experience shared variously by all mothers in which loving and hating feelings for their children exist side by side.'[5] When I share this concept with clients, it goes some way to removing a sense of shame for having contradictory feelings about their children, and opens the door to more self-compassion. This can enable more acceptance and integration of the complexity of being a mother. However, when we explore what lies behind the anger or challenging emotions they feel, an even more complex picture often emerges. Clients need language for not only an intense emotional landscape, but also to process change across a huge array of internal and external domains. This is where the concept of matrescence comes in.

The term 'matrescence' was first coined in the 1970s by medical anthropologist, Dana Raphael.[6] From her extensive studies, she noted that the transition to motherhood was treated as an important life stage requiring dedicated support across many cultures. She called this transition 'matrescence' and she named the person who cares for the mother during this time a 'doula' (after the Greek word for this role). In recent

> **When clients first come to me, they often struggle to articulate the sense of disconnect between what they think they *should* feel and what they *do* feel as mothers**

years, the term matrescence has been revived by Aurélie Athan, a clinical psychologist, who describes matrescence as:

*'a developmental passage where a woman transitions through pre-conception, pregnancy and birth, surrogacy or adoption, to the postnatal period and beyond. The exact length of matrescence is individual, recurs with each child, and may arguably last a lifetime! The scope of the changes encompasses multiple domains — bio-psycho-social-political-spiritual— and can be likened to the developmental push of adolescence.'*[7]

In my therapeutic coaching practice, I find that when I share this definition of matrescence, it resonates deeply with clients. The biggest 'a-ha' moment is when they are able to compare what they are currently going through with the tumult of adolescence. I witness an emerging recognition that motherhood is a developmental stage in which everything they thought they knew about themselves changes. This is a powerful counterbalance to the internalised sense of shame I often encounter in clients, thinking they are alone in struggling so much. Although an awareness of matrescence doesn't necessarily help these clients to reconcile the losses and gains of motherhood, the huge shifts in identity, and deep conflicts in their emotional landscape, it does help them to make sense of what is going on for them as a normal process, rather than an individual aberration.

## Situate distress: enable clients to see individual issues within a broader context

*'Everyone else seems to have it together. I don't know how the other mums do this seamless return to work and putting the baby in daycare thing. I am the only one who can't cope.'*

Much of my work with clients involves holding space for the contradictory feelings and complex identity shifts that motherhood brings. Sharing the concept of matrescence can help normalise at least some of this experience. However, while matrescence may be developmentally normative, it is also a *culturally situated* process.[8] Culture shapes the way that individual mothers perceive the nature of their role. There are assumptions about different types of mothers in our society. Labels such as 'SAHM' (stay-at-home mother), 'single mum', 'working mother', and 'mumpreneur' are often pitched against each other. Clients may mould themselves to these cultural norms in a way that restricts their sense of agency. Therefore, another aspect of my therapeutic coaching process is to explore the underlying values clients hold about themselves as mothers, and how these intersect with other roles in their lives. Specifically, I help clients to articulate and examine their expectations about what a mother 'should' be and do.

The model of motherhood that most of my clients struggle with is derived from the 'perfect mother' myth pervasive in Western culture.[9] The perfect mother is untroubled by conflicting emotions, content within a maternal role, ever-loving and available for her children, while simultaneously able to return to work, and 'bounce back' into a pre-pregnancy body. So, it is perhaps unsurprising that individuals think they are at fault when they fail to live up to this impossible ideal. The complex reality of their matrescence doesn't match the fantasy version of motherhood they may have held. They assume that they have a mental health problem, or are unique in being unable to cope with the demands of modern motherhood.

Working mothers face a particular double-bind, which sociologist Sophie Brock calls the 'care/career conundrum'.[10] On the one hand, there is a pressure to perform intensive mothering that requires them to be 'selfless' in attending to the needs of their children. On the other hand, there are the demands of a successful career that require them to be 'selfish' in prioritising work over care. This conundrum is borne out by Kathy Cotter's research on the transition from being a stay-at-home mother to paid employee.[11] Participants in her study typically placed the needs of their partner and children before their own, and sought to minimise disruption to others in returning to work.

Cotter argues that coaches and therapists can play a key role in enabling such clients to explore losses, examine gendered assumptions, consider barriers to a successful return to work, and plan for long-term self-care.[11] I agree wholeheartedly, and propose the addition of matrescence as a supportive concept in this dialogue. Sharing the magnitude of 'bio-psycho-social-political-spiritual' change matrescence brings, helps clients to accept a wider range of feelings. Unmasking the current cultural conditions in which this transition to motherhood is largely ignored or unsupported further helps them to place their own sense of guilt or failing within a broader context.

## Enable growth: empower clients to find their own agency within motherhood

*'I have to get this right. Nothing has ever mattered so much to me. I need someone to tell me I'm doing a good enough job.'*

Once clients begin to view their experience through the lens of matrescence, I find it opens up space to create a version of motherhood that works for them. As the dominant cultural narrative perpetuates the 'perfect' mother, my view is that one of the most powerful ways to support clients is to explore what being a 'good enough' mother might mean to them. Sometimes, this exploration leads to small incremental changes in what they want to continue doing. Other times, it precipitates a complete rejection of a particular aspect of the 'perfect mother' myth they have previously adhered to.

An example of this can be illustrated by a common experience of stress that several clients have shared around

organising children's birthday parties. We have explored what would be 'good enough' in this context. One client decided to host a large party for her child's entire class because she knew she would feel guilty if she didn't. Her concession to not having enough time to do everything herself was to involve a party planner and get a shop-bought cake. Another client decided to scrap the idea of parties altogether despite a sense that it was what she 'should' do. She asked her son which friend he would like to have on a special play-date. She saw that he enjoyed the day just as much and felt encouraged to do something similar the following year.

Although this may seem trivial, it is often everyday decisions and tasks that define an individual's sense of control over their lived experience of motherhood.[12] When clients are able to unpack assumptions and motives behind something like hosting a birthday party, it can lead to a sense of agency around much larger questions in their lives, such as if or when to return to work full time, how to challenge the division of labour in the household, or whether to homeschool their child.

Once again, I find that turning to the concept of matrescence as a developmental framework supports exploration of these larger questions. As children grow and develop, so too do the demands they make of their caregivers. In Donald Winnicott's classic definition, the 'good enough' mother is highly attuned and responsive to her newborn infant but gradually diminishes her input over time to enable her growing child to adapt to the external world.[13] I think it is just as important to acknowledge that mothers grow and develop too. Matrescence holds that motherhood is not a fixed state or identity, but rather a constantly evolving process. It might be likened to a dance that continues between a mother and her children throughout the lifespan.[14] Making this dance visible to mothers and to those that support them enables greater choice around what steps they might take.

## In conclusion

My experience as a mother returning to work after the birth of my daughter 12 years ago was one where I felt invisible. I felt overwhelmed by trying to maintain a façade of 'perfect worker' in my career and 'perfect mother' in my home life. Despite generous maternity leave and flexible working policies, there was no acknowledgement of the immense change I was going through, and no support to help me integrate the different aspects of my experience.

In the last 10 years, I have supported mothers who tell a similar story. It is time to change the script. I believe that coaches and therapists are well placed to help clients articulate the invisible. They can do this by using the language of matrescence, and by bringing an awareness of motherhood as socially constructed process to the conversation. Although this knowledge alone does not change the systemic inequalities that mothers face in our society[15], I believe it helps individual mothers to challenge an internal narrative that keeps them feeling guilty and isolated. When mothers feel heard, change is possible. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Ali Pember** is a therapeutic coach in private practice. After over 10 years running birth preparation and postnatal support groups, she now specialises in supporting clients through matrescence (the transition to motherhood). Her background is in psychology, and she brings a rich toolkit of mindfulness and somatic approaches to her therapeutic work.

**www.goodenoughmama.co.uk**

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# The social impact of coaching for wellbeing

**Carolyn Mumby** talks to **Dr Ana Paula Nacif** about her new book, *Coaching for Wellbeing: An Evidence-based Guide for Practitioners*

**Carolyn Mumby** and **Dr Ana Paula Nacif** are members of the Coaching for Social Impact steering group (www.coaching4socialimpact.com) which aims to bring together anyone involved in coaching people for the social good in a supportive and collaborative network.

In this conversation, they explore information and ideas from Ana's new book *Coaching for Wellbeing*[1] and highlight the need for this work to be further researched and funded.

**CM:** Ana, could you introduce us to your journey into coaching and, specifically, coaching for wellbeing?

**APN:** When I completed my coaching training many years ago, I was invited by a not-for-profit organisation to run wellbeing workshops with their clients, HIV-positive gay men. I was a relatively newly qualified coach and did not have great expertise on the topic. I remember frantically doing loads of research for every workshop and feeling very fearful of my ability to deliver. However, I fell in love with the topic and the client group, continuing the learning, development, and growth through other workshops over many weekends. It was such a joy working with them.

I am a passionate advocate for the need to base more of our coaching work on sound theoretical understanding and research, so I enrolled for a doctorate. I based my thesis on group coaching for wellbeing in a community context,[2] because coaching in groups is impactful for more people, and creates ongoing networks of support.

I'd learned a lot from experience but when I began to delve into the literature, a whole new world opened up, and I realised that it was an extremely complex subject. The doctorate was focused on practice because, for me, research has to have a practical impact. It was a dream of mine to enable commissioners to better understand that coaching for wellbeing is part of the prevention agenda that's talked about but not properly resourced. I used the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS),[3] which is recognised by both academics and policymakers in the UK, including the National Health Service. I thought 'if I use a scale they understand, perhaps they will listen', but I now think I was quite naïve. We need more opportunities for people to get funding to run large-scale studies where they would have more weight in terms of the literature they produce. There are various ways of measuring wellbeing, and evidence is extremely important. However, there is also the tension between wanting to measure something and knowing that for me, the person's experience is potentially more important than the numbers that are showing up on their scale.

It became clear to me that wellbeing is the foundation of all coaching work. It's about everything that we experience as human beings: our lives, our work, our leisure and our relationships. I knew that no one was going to read a thesis if it was too dry, and I wanted to share my learning with coaches who wish to work in the area of wellbeing. In the book, I explain the theoretical basis and the research evidence around wellbeing, and then give tools and case studies. In fact, I created the book that I wish I had found when I first started when I didn't know anything and thought, 'If I want to do this, where do I go?' I also wanted to write a book that considers wellbeing as 'wellbeing', not health coaching.

**CM:** So how does coaching for wellbeing differ from health coaching?

**APN:** Health coaching is usually linked to improving either physical or mental health, or to managing the health condition so it impacts a person's life less. Coaching for wellbeing tends to be multi-dimensional in its focus, so we could describe wellbeing as the umbrella, with health coaching sitting under that, but also with focus on interpersonal, social, and psychological aspects of our experience as human beings. One of the things that I've had conversations about with health coaches is the fact that it's all very well for us to think about compliance - for example, whether their clients are taking or not taking their medication – and the model where we go: exercise - 'tick', eating well -'tick', and you have all these boxes to check. I know they're important but my experience of working with people living with long-term health conditions is that there is a lot more to their wellbeing than just their health. For example, the longest wellbeing study conducted by Harvard[4] revealed that people who have meaningful relationships achieve better wellbeing, regardless of what they eat, smoke, or do for exercise etc.

> **It became clear to me that wellbeing is the foundation of all coaching work. It's about everything that we experience as human beings: our lives, our work, our leisure and our relationships**

One of the challenges that we also have with funding is the need for things to happen quickly; wanting a quick fix for things is a societal issue. So, I say to people when we are working on our wellbeing that it's not something you do one day, and it's done. It's an ongoing thing.

**CM:** You reference DiClemente and Prochaska's Transtheoretical Model of Change[5] when you are writing about 'fostering long-lasting changes'. The authors acknowledged people making change seem to go through six stages cyclically and that relapse is very likely to be a part of that. The recognition is that you can have a relapse, but it doesn't mean you go back to the beginning; you can explore what caused the relapse and find a way back to maintaining change. Taking a more fluid and forgiving approach, a self-compassionate attitude, seems to be key.

**APN:** Yes, it's important to have a sense of the inevitable fluctuation in our wellbeing.

**CM:** In Chapter 5, you describe the notions of flourishing and languishing, and you acknowledge that the absence of mental illness does not necessarily equate to good mental health. People may still be feeling very low. Equally, you can have a serious mental illness and have a high level of mental wellbeing alongside that diagnosis. David Britten has also spoken about this,[6] and for me it challenges the idea that coaching is only for a certain group of people. I'm interested too in how we decide whether someone's flourishing or languishing. I've been working with polyvagal theory,[7] and the concept that our story about the world and ourselves tends to arise from the different state we're in, in our nervous system. It's different if we're defensively mobilised, in defensive collapse and when we're in ventral vagal, where we feel safe and connected. We might be cycling through from flourishing, which we might equate to ventral, and we might then be mobilised in sympathetic, and then we might fall into dorsal vagal when we get very overwhelmed, which I think would probably equate to that idea of languishing. This shift in state can happen quite quickly and is a normal part of responding to life, but if we're not anchored in ventral sufficiently, we might spend long periods defensively mobilised and then become so overwhelmed that we get stuck in dorsal vagal, which equates to that sense of very low mood and often withdrawal from the world. Can you say something more about the parameters of when somebody's defined to be flourishing or languishing, and the longevity of that?

**APN:** The language comes from our needs in academia and science to label experiences and measure them; there is a languishing and flourishing scale,[8] and it's often thought about in terms of the intensity and longevity of the experience. I agree that we have a whole variety of experiences and emotions throughout our day or week. But when in the flourishing space, we have more resources to cope with whatever life throws at us, and the energy to pick ourselves up. We can see the horizon. In the languishing space, everything feels more difficult and it's harder to see choices; the sense of horizon is not there. This relates to what we were saying about mental illness and good mental health. It's true to say that I can be diagnosed with schizophrenia, or a general anxiety disorder, and yet I can manage it well. I know what's going to trigger me. I can then take steps to prevent a crisis. If I do have a crisis, I know what to do with myself to get through that crisis in the best possible way. Equally, I may have no clinical diagnosis, but I may be stuck in that place where there is no energy, no light, there is a sense of being stuck and not seeing the possibilities in life, and it doesn't necessarily mean that I'm clinically depressed. I'm a functioning person but that's how I'm feeling.

**CM:** Yes, and sometimes resource may be available, but we can't see it, or we can't connect to it. So flourishing may depend on understanding more about who we are and the challenges we're facing, and having the ability to prevent ourselves from going into a crisis or getting into a spiral that's going to oppress our wellbeing, and that sense that we have a strategy for a way out.

**APN:** Yes, in the same way, we might respond to our emotions, we don't discount them, but we perhaps don't completely identify with them either. There is room for me to step away a little bit and then think and act because I'm not so embedded into that story.

**CM:** You also talk in the book about the kind of obsession with wellbeing that comes with social media influencers, which can create unrealistic or unrealisable expectations.

**APN:** Yes, I get frustrated with the commoditisation of wellbeing. We can sometimes alienate people because they think that wellbeing is just for the people who have money and time, especially they are being told 'if you sign up for this class or buy this product you'll have wellbeing'. That can lead those who do not have the resources to feel they are failing in life and that wellbeing is out of their reach, which is not helpful.

**CM:** This takes us back to the idea of coaching for social impact. You talk in the book about the difference between a focus on personal accountability versus systemic pressures, and the recognition that people are not having opportunity for resources and support equally, and therefore that affects their wellbeing.

**APN:** Absolutely. When working with the wellbeing of a population who are experiencing a systemic challenge, a demographic that is struggling at some level, we need to be very mindful regarding our biases. We have to be careful that we do not dismiss that demographic by thinking 'they can't have wellbeing because they're struggling too much, first they need something else'. I firmly believe that even with all the challenges people might be facing, there are little things they can do every day to support their wellbeing. Even those whose basic needs may be lacking can find joy in life and flourish. That's not to deny that, as a society, we need to ensure that people's basic needs are met. But I think sometimes we need to be careful that we don't decide on behalf of other people what is possible for them in terms of wellbeing. In the book, I explore some of the philosophies and theories about meaning. We can have a positive experience and still be in a very difficult situation. These experiences are not mutually exclusive.

**CM:** I note that you provide guidance on four coaching phases: exploring meaning and vision, working on values and purpose, a focus on choices and strategies, and a consolidation and celebratory phase. I think this has great relevance for practitioners who are working in an integrated way, incorporating elements of counselling and coaching.

**APN:** It's important to emphasise again that within this process how balance is thought about and discovered is down to the individual ie, what balance looks and feels like for them, especially given that we live in a world of social media and comparison. The question is 'What is it that you want for your life?' Some people may want a lot more time with their family, whereas others may want to work more because they have other projects that they want to take forward. Imposed messages about wellbeing can be experienced as a burden or a checklist of 'oughts' even if it's something worthy like mindfulness, yoga, eating well, or exercise, etc.

**CM:** Some coaching clients may come almost expecting you to lick them into shape. If the coach is not very experienced and grounded, they can be pulled into an agenda, which is about accountability, rather than the client responding to themselves through that regular reflection and exploration. It's important to create a space for them to reflect, for example: 'I wanted to do this but I didn't. What happened that got in my way? What am I assuming stopped me from taking that action? How did it feel not to do it? Can I move towards that again if that's what I want to do? What might that give me?' I can see with coaching for wellbeing that there are a few traps that we could fall into, like taking over the agenda from having a feeling of responsibility for the outcomes.

**APN:** Another trap might be that we move too quickly into finding the goal and breaking it down – saying, 'Let's put a plan together' or 'Let's find a strategy' for whatever it is that the client wants to achieve, without really taking time to explore the *experience* of the client. If a client comes to a coach and says, 'I want to eat better', chances are they know what they should be eating. They're often well-informed, but they're not doing it. There is something that's stopping them, so if we go very quickly into setting goals, we might be contributing to them feeling like a failure because they won't do it. It's important for the coach to take a step back and understand the experience of the client. Do you know what's driving their desire for their outcome? What would that mean to them? Because we live in a society that is obsessed with the optimisation of human beings, as if we are machines, we can be caught up in the idea that we need to get results quickly, when often we need to take time because once the client finds their key, they can use it in other situations. It can be detrimental to the client to focus too quickly on goals because they might feel that, 'I can't do this. I've tried but I have proved myself to be a failure again and again.'

**I get frustrated with the commoditisation of wellbeing. We can sometimes alienate people because they think that wellbeing is just for the people who have money and time**

**CM:** Yes, and the less experienced coach can get pulled into feeling that they too have failed because if they were a good coach, they would help their client to achieve their goals.

In your book you explore how in Western societies we seem to have a culture of deficit. We tend to focus on the gaps and what's missing and on top of that, we have the discourse of success, performance, growth and achievement. There is never a moment to rest and we're off to the next challenge and the next. You talk about how this culture is taking its toll on families, workplaces, and schools, so is there also a broader societal relevance to the idea of wellbeing?

**APN:** Yes, I had an internal debate about whether to share coaching tools because sometimes, I think people are looking for the shortcut. But I understand that the tools can be that 'beginning' for coaches to use to find their way and have some sort of safety as they explore the topic. There is a very practical side to coaching of course, but I think that nothing replaces that relational space where you sit with your client and learn about their experience; I wanted to invite coaches to think about when we reach for a tool, what is our intention? Can we use it in a reflective meaningful way as part of the work?

**CM:** So rather than thinking, what's the perceived deficit and how can we hop over it with this tool, you're more focused on the client's experience and the territory that they're in and the sense of how they are navigating forward, and what they're already doing that's working.

**APN:** Yes, we don't *do* coaching to people - we partner with them. Groups can be such a beautifully supportive environment, there is a wealth and richness of experience in a group and it's often where you see a fuller spectrum of experience of wellbeing. If we build a safe dynamic, people realise they are not alone with their struggles, are enthused by the achievement of others and recognise that because others have done it, maybe they can do it too.

**CM:** So as well as in community settings, if you're working in organisations and creating space for a wellbeing discussion, how do you bring that to life?

**APN:** We know from research that management or managers have a massive impact on people's wellbeing.[9] If a space is created for reflection about the culture of the organisation, where the focus is not just on a tick box, or individual wellbeing, they can be supported to consult their staff and create a better environment and processes to support the wellbeing of all.

Finally I think it's also vital to encourage coaches to take some time to understand their own wellbeing; I think that's when the 'being' as the coach, comes to life with the client work.

**CM:** So maybe people could do some co-coaching based on some of the ideas from the book or by using some of the frameworks or tools presented?

**APN:** Absolutely. This is an invitation for us all to look after ourselves. It's always good to have a reminder, because life gets in the way! ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Carolyn Mumby** is a coach-therapist offering an integrated practice to clients and supervising dual trained practitioners and coaches.

**Dr Ana Paula Nacif** is an experienced executive and group coach, facilitator and consultant who works with individuals and organisations in the areas of wellbeing, inclusion and leadership. She has nearly 20 years of coaching experience within the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors, and is an academic and active researcher in coaching and wellbeing. She is also the co-editor of *The Philosophy of Coaching: an International Journal.*

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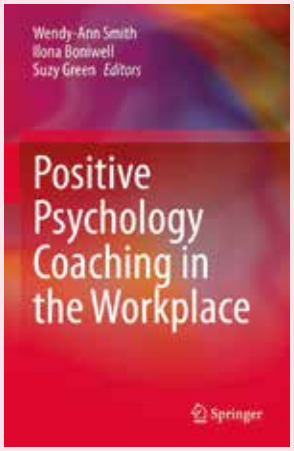
# What you're reading

# On the bookshelf




## Positive Psychology Coaching in the Workplace

**Edited by Wendy-Ann Smith, Ilona Boniwell, Suzy Green**
**Springer 2021**
**ISBN 978-3-030-79951-9**

A 'research to practice' text, this book explores how coaching can be used to support wellbeing, as well as performance, in individuals and teams in the workplace. Its focus is on positive psychology (PP) and how that discipline intersects with organisational psychology (OP) and coaching psychology (CP). The editors bring together global thought leaders in this field, writing in a scholarly style, supported by current research. Each chapter focuses on practice and includes a case study, discussion points to help engage with and embed learning, and further recommended reading.

The early chapters in **Part I: Convergence of Positive Psychology, Organisational Psychology and Coaching Psychology** are likely to appeal to academics and graduate students within the discipline of psychology, and may prove less accessible for coaches without this background.

The authors stress the need for *'a foundational understanding of the core elements of science, such as falsification, distribution and replication, controlled experiments and survey research...* (p25). I don't have psychology training and 'scientific literacy' is not something to which I would lay claim, though I can, and do, as the authors suggest, seek to interact with research, reading journals and attending conferences.

However, I was heartened to discover references to many beloved approaches that I already use in my working life as a coach, and found that the text provided context, theory and an evidence base that further enhanced my understanding of the provenance and possible application of a number of them. It introduced me to many more about which I was less well-informed or unaware.

Chapters within **Part II: Professional and Ethical Practice of Positive Psychology Coaching (PPC) in the Workplace** examine how to instil a positive organisational culture, and emphasise the importance of robust measures to demonstrate the value of workplace PPC. They explore the need for sustainable practices that 'consolidate the gains' within the work. Therapeutic coaches will already be familiar with the role of supervision for 'widening the lens' of reflective practice.

**Part III: PPC Coaching for Resilience and Wellbeing in the Workplace** focuses on coaching with emotions and creating high quality connections in the workplace, as well as coaching for wellbeing and resilience, and developing psychological capital to support change. The chapter on coaching interventions for challenging experiences and post-traumatic growth, provides a particularly useful framework of questions for the client to help with tracking high points and low points in their career, which through reflection can enable the letting go of old stories and creating a new strategy for moving forward.

**Part IV** has as its focus **Team and Systemic Approaches to PPC**. This includes an intriguing approach to using film in coaching systemic awareness (a form of mindfulness) with the aim of developing

socially interconnected and inclusive leaders. Coaching teams positively from a complex adaptive systems perspective forecasts a growth in team coaching, and a shift from linear thinking and a focus on dysfunction and discrete problems, to an appreciation of the impact of the organisation and environment on supporting and sustaining change. Looking 'inside the nest' for individuals, pairs, groupings (p306) and 'outside the nest' ie, the wider eco-system (p307), offer penetrating systemic questions.

**Part V** considers **PPC for Leadership** during disruption and crisis, with chapters variously affirming the importance of 'positive' leadership with focus on values, emotions, relationships, communication and appreciation. PPC coaching for career transition and management makes an explicit link with how wellbeing is essential in support and informing our choices. The authors share coaching methods and explore four aspects to counter the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) circumstances that we currently face, namely: Vitality (physical and mental wellbeing), Understand (values and strengths) Consolidate (align future options), and Articulate (their value in the market) (p341). Chapters on adult development, strength-based coaching and sustainability leadership continue this theme, asserting the importance of 'helping groups of people to achieve environmental and social outcomes that are assessed as significant' (p379). This is of vital interest to the field of coaching for social impact, and good to see in a book focused on the workplace.

In **Part VI: Tools for Positive Psychology Coaching in the Workplace**, chapters consider a neuroscience-informed coaching practice, job crafting through a coaching partnership, tangible tools for PPC, and provide a useful compendium of tools and how to use them, including the excellent 'emotions in actions' grid, which I have experience of using with clients to raise awareness and choice (p451). This section also includes a chapter on how 'Lego®serious play®' in individual coaching creates safety and flow through building reflecting and talking. The case study shows, how Lego was used to explore the 'build question', ie 'Your task is to build a model that enables you to answer the question: *When I am working at my best, it's like – what?*' (p473), which provoked a powerful metaphor for reflection generating insight to help with decision making.

The chapters in **Part VII: Convergence of Clinical Interventions and Virtuousness in PPC** resonate with many of the challenges to which, in my experience, therapeutic coaching seeks to respond. 'Coaching with Compassion' references intentional change theory (ICT) ie, that self-directed change happens in individuals and systems as a series of emergent discoveries. The experience of 'mining for gold' rather than 'digging for dirt' with an empathic concern for what is difficult (p485) as expressed by Boyatzis[1] resonates strongly with the integrated approach. Detailed examples of pertinent questions are provided to structure the exploration through ICT.

**I was struck by this as a blueprint not only for wellbeing in organisations, but better living, leadership and global responsibility**

'Acceptance and Commitment Coaching in the Workplace', has a focus on 'workability' (whether an action moves the coachee towards greater meaning purpose or vitality) and increasing psychological flexibility (p498). Present moment awareness is a key component of the approach. (We have seen this approach have value for coach-therapists, featured in a recent Coaching for Social Impact podcast episode.[2])

In the chapter featuring coaching from an integrative model of wisdom, wisdom is defined as 'an integrative quality of reflection and action that considers relationships between self, others, all others and all things, in time and over time, balancing interests towards a common good' (p531). Central characteristics and supporting skills are beautifully articulated, along with practices within the coaching relationship, to the point that I was struck by this as a blueprint not only for wellbeing in organisations, but better living, leadership and global responsibility.

'Meaning Centred Coaching in the Workplace' explores three factors in meaningful work (p558): it has a point and identifiable outcome; helps build meaning in the rest of life; and does something good for the world. The chapter introduces two models, one for an individual pathway and the other for the organisation to create the fertile ground for meaningful work.

**Part VIII: Conclusion and Future Directions** sees the editors reflect on the enormous contribution they see that PPC can make to enable thriving in the workplace, referring back to the approaches that have been explored in the preceding chapters, with calls to action in the form of emerging themes and suggested areas for future research.

There is a keen and welcome focus throughout on recent workplace challenges, which underlines the importance of acknowledging this challenging context with individual clients who may otherwise assume their struggles are due to their own 'failings'.

This book provides compelling evidence from research with which coaches can make a business case for coaching with individuals and teams using the PPC methodology. There is a proliferation of acronyms throughout the text, which are useful frames for attention to particular areas, and thoroughly elucidated, but which can make reading a challenge.

However, each chapter provides such a thorough, research-based exploration and clear theoretical and practical explanation of how to use the approach, that this handbook will prove to be an invaluable and enlightening guide to practice. ■

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### About the reviewer

**Carolyn Mumby** is a coach-therapist, supervisor, facilitator and writer in private practice. She is a founder member of Coaching for Social Impact and has a developing interest in coaching for the 'third act' of life.
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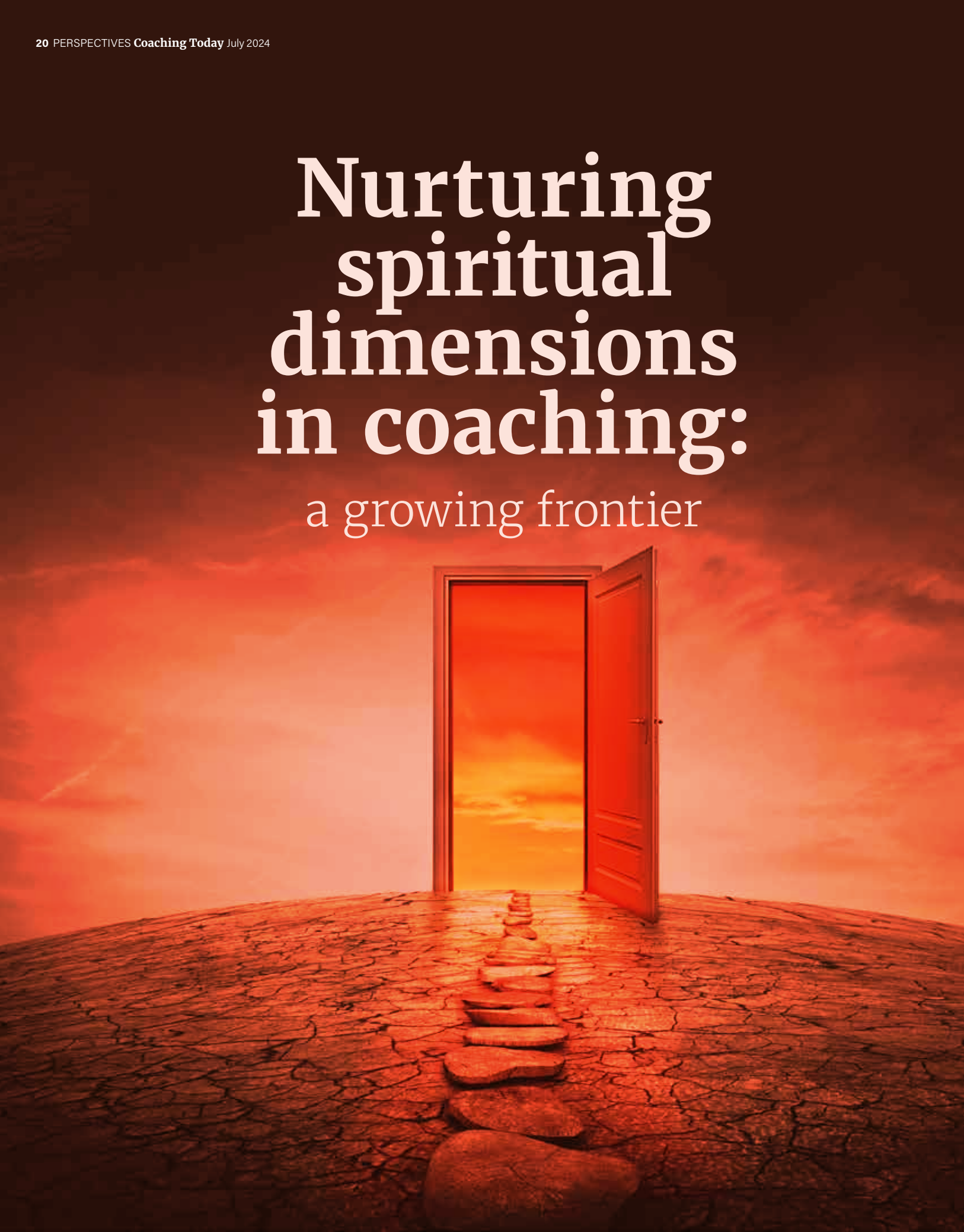
# Nurturing spiritual dimensions in coaching:

## a growing frontier



**DeeAnna Merz Nagel** and **Madison Leigh Akridge** explore the developing area of spiritual coaching and explain how they aim to contribute to the field with a new collection of case studies

What happens when you set out to teach on the topic of spiritual coaching and find there is almost no professional literature available? When I, DeeAnna Merz Nagel (DMN) was asked by a university seeking to offer a spiritual coaching graduate certificate, to curate a curriculum and teach a course, I decided to partner with fellow coach and colleague, Madison Leigh Akridge (MLA). Together, we enlisted key experts in the field of spiritual coaching and invited them to contribute their insights. In this way, a book was born from that realisation. Our mission was clear: to gather seasoned spiritual coaches who have shaped this emerging area of the coaching profession, alongside new spiritual coaches who bring diverse perspectives. We asked them to share their work through a variety of case studies, showcasing their diverse backgrounds and approaches for others to learn from. In doing so, we aimed to foster a community dedicated to this vital work.

As certified coaches and licensed mental health practitioners in counselling and social work, we have both long been aware of the prominence of 'spiritually integrated psychotherapy' and 'spiritually informed social work' in our fields, and have integrated these concepts into our practices. However, we found a significant gap in the literature when applying these terms to coaching. Our book seeks to fill that gap and provide guidance for coaches whose clients bring spiritual content into their session, emphasising essential coaching skills such as active listening, powerful questioning and goal setting, within the context of spiritual coaching.

## Coaching as a distinct profession

When exploring spiritually informed coaching in this context, it is important to first acknowledge that coach theory and applications are distinct from those of other helping relationships such as counselling, mentoring or consulting. While coaching is rooted in psychology, and specifically in positive psychology, each can be used independently. In general, to date, coaching does not have a defined legal scope of practice. While counselling is becoming regulated by many countries, although not in the UK, and has specific rules governing its scope, coaching, on the other hand, is guided by professional associations that offer competences and ethical codes to guide coach professionals. BACP's Coaching Competence Framework is a solid example of such guidance.[1]

## Differences between coaching and counselling

As coach practitioners and educators, we understand the main differences between coaching and counselling. Both involve working closely with a professional who is qualified to help set goals, provide support, give guidance and feedback. In our experience, the main difference between the two methods is that counselling focuses more on emotional pain and healing old wounds, whereas coaching focuses on developing skills and behaviours to grow. Both disciplines use similar skills and techniques such as active listening and powerful questioning.

## Differences between religion and spirituality

In order to set the context for a deeper understanding of spiritual coaching, we define the differences between religion and spirituality as religion encompassing individual or organised belief systems, rituals and behaviours pertaining to spirituality. Spirituality, on the other hand, focuses on the soul or spirit rather than material concerns, embodying the essence that enlivens our bodies, also known as consciousness. It involves connecting with the spirit using all our senses, known and unknown, such as sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell. The spirit is referred to by various names like God, Creator, Divine, Great Spirit, Source, Elohi, Allah, etc.[2]

## Defining spiritual coaching, spiritual counselling and spiritual direction

Now we come to the question: what is spiritual coaching? We have already emphasised the need to understand the difference between coaching and counselling. Counselling, in general, aims to correct maladaptive behaviour that leads to dysfunctional living, while coaching is mainly proactive and focuses on the client's goals and outcomes.

It is also important to understand the difference between *spiritual direction* and coaching. Spiritual direction is the process of journeying and discussing with others to connect with the Divine, who, as stated above, can be referenced in many ways.[2] Spiritual direction can be non-directive. While spiritual exercises are sometimes used, it is more about listening to the spiritual story of the directee. Spiritual directors are midwives for the soul, helping others to develop their spiritual growth. Spirituality is an experience of the process.

> **Spirituality can emerge in coaching sessions that are otherwise centred on different aspects of life, such as work and wellness**

*Spiritual coaching* is more proactive and focuses on client outcomes and goals, but with a spiritual perspective. The coaching process is infused with spirituality, whether directly or indirectly. Many coaches address spiritual issues within the coaching relationship, whether or not they define themselves as 'spiritual coaches'. Spirituality is often a topic that arises in the coaching relationship, whether a practitioner calls themselves a 'spiritual coach' specifically or goes by other titles like 'life coach', 'wellness coach', or 'executive coach'. Spirituality can be expressed overtly by a client when they describe an experience during a religious service, for example; or it may be expressed covertly through the experienced benefits of art, community or physical activities.

Some coaches are faith-based. For example, a Christian coach might describe themselves as a spiritual coach. The coach may suggest that a devout Christian read Bible passages, or engage in exercises using sacred texts or practices within their chosen religion. Some spiritual coaches work outside the boundaries of religion, while using some of these practices. These coaches might use a variety of tools, including Reiki, essential oils, yoga and literature on mindfulness. A coach-client pair based on shared religion might choose a prayer from their own tradition to use in a coaching session. However, a pair based on spirituality might use guided meditation, or a writing activity, using prompts from their respective specialties.[3]

Trained as coaches and therapists, and researching how spirituality shows up with clients, we believe that coaching is a process of spiritual integration. Spiritually integrated coaching is practised by any coach who recognises that the client's spiritual content, whether direct/overt or indirect/covert, will be brought into the coaching process.

Now we will look at spiritually integrated psychotherapy in order to better understand how these concepts can be applied to coaching.

## The spiritually integrated therapist

Spiritually integrated therapy explores the ways in which spirituality and religion influence clients' lives, as well as the therapists themselves.

Spiritually informed social workers believe that the integration of religion and spirituality in their work, and using those parts that support resilience and strength building (for clients who wish to do so) can support behavioural psychology work.

Spiritually conscious psychotherapy can be categorised on a continuum, ranging from an outright avoidance to a direct and explicit focus. At one extreme of the continuum, spiritually avoidant psychotherapy is where the practitioner tries to avoid any issues relating to spirituality. The practitioner may even avoid the topic altogether if the client requests a discussion. At the other end, the practitioner focuses on the spirituality of the client with the goal of helping clients resolve issues, through maintaining or changing religious/spiritual behaviours and beliefs. The continuum includes the spiritually informed practitioner, and the practitioner who is spiritually integrated. Both practitioners are able to hold space for a client's process of spirituality within the therapeutic relationship, without explicitly seeking to maintain or transform religious or spiritual beliefs or behaviours.[4]

## The spiritually integrated coach

We can examine the concept of implicit (indirect), and explicit (direct), content in the coaching conversation to better understand spiritually integrated coaching.

Spiritually integrated coaching can include explicit content; for example, a client may share that reading the Bible every day is a useful discipline. Another client may describe how reading daily positive affirmations is a helpful exercise. The first is an explicit example of spiritual content, while the second is an implicit example. Both implicit and explicit content are relevant to a spiritually integrated coach. Images of God, prayers within sessions and references to sacred texts are examples of explicit content, while implicit content may be expressed as existential anxiety or hope versus depression, and themes of loneliness and solitude. Existential issues show up by way of four main concerns: death and freedom, existential loneliness and meaninglessness. These existential themes can be seen in coaching sessions as goals and issues related to one's career, relationships or living a more fulfilling, meaningful life.[5,6]

Whether a coach is working from the framework of energy healing, 12-step support or a specific religion, the goal of coaching is the same. The work is focused on helping the client expand their inner belief system, regardless of religious or spiritual beliefs. With spiritually integrated coaching, even clients who have had negative experiences with a religious upbringing can find their core strength and live from this place. It doesn't matter if the coach/client pair agrees or disagrees about a particular set of beliefs. Clients who are unbelievers can also benefit from spiritual coaching when they're offered the opportunity to use their intuition, gut instinct, or understanding of their situation as being existential.[7]

Our aim is to transfer wisdom from the existing field of spiritually integrated psychotherapy to coaches, creating a new group of spiritually integrated coaches. By incorporating the concepts of integration into coaching, coaches also demonstrate cultural humility. They honour differences, while learning and examining culturally spiritual experiences to guide clients towards goal achievement.

The coach can develop a holistic perspective by combining topics that were historically separated, such as spirituality and psychology. This concept combines the wisdom traditions with modern coaching practices. The coaching encounter can be refreshed by focusing on what the soul desires.

## Coaching with integrity

Coaching is a fun, inspiring, collaborative and meaningful profession, which can enhance people's lives. Over the last few decades, the coaching profession has grown rapidly and expanded to every industry, from corporate to healthcare.

Spiritual coaching is an expanding subspecialty in the field of coaching. The many ways spiritual coaching is offered might lead one to believe that it's difficult to identify the common elements within this subspecialty. On the contrary, solid coach competences can be demonstrated in all the varying approaches within the niche of spiritual coaching.

Solid spiritual coaching is interwoven with ethical expectations, listening skills and powerful questions. Depending on the coaching approach used, metaphors, appreciative enquiry and goal setting are also woven in. Solid coach training programmes offer teachings regarding cultural competency. Spiritual literacy falls under the subset of cultural competency, and both cultural competences and spiritual literacy sit under the umbrella of cultural humility. The coaching profession has a responsibility to acknowledge and recognise spirituality. This can be done in conjunction with religion, but also as a separate, equal principle. Incorporating the words 'spirituality' or 'spiritual belief' into the codes of conduct or framework will advance the field, and help to create more spiritually aware and integrated coaches.

The integration of spirituality and spiritual language in the lexicon of coaching is an ever-evolving product of systems change. Such change occurs when professionals in the field become thought leaders due to their passion for the project.

## Strengthening the field

Through our research and experience, we have concluded that coaches are increasingly being asked to discuss spiritual themes with clients, and we believe that spiritual coaching has now found its place at the coaching table. Spirituality is a topic that's being discussed more, as clients struggle to find meaning. We are now seeing that spiritual coaching has its own niche within the broader field of coaching. Spirituality can emerge in coaching sessions that are otherwise centred on different aspects of life, such as work and wellness.[8]

## In tribute – Dr Kate Anthony

DMN – Defining the difference between counselling and coaching has long been my remit. In 2008, I co-founded the Online Therapy Institute with Dr Kate Anthony. Dr Anthony was a BACP Fellow and an instrumental thought leader in the field. In 2010, the Online Therapy Institute expanded to include online coaching. Together, Kate and I launched *TILT Magazine* (Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology) and offered educational articles and courses for coaches. In 2012, we wrote an article about the brave new world of online coaching for the launch issue of *Coaching Today*.[9] From that point, Dr Anthony was instrumental in introducing the concept of online coaching to the BACP Coaching division.

In 2021, Kate and I wrote a book together about online coaching[10], and shortly after, we contributed a second article for *Coaching Today* about the new ethical framework regarding technology and coaching.[11] Our synergy continued, and in 2023, we completed our final work together: a chapter about spiritual coaching and the numinous moments that show up within an online coaching session.[12]

Sadly, just before our book was published, Dr Kate Anthony passed away. Kate had every intention of writing an article about spiritual coaching for *Coaching Today*, so with her death, I, (DMN) took that charge, paying forward her legacy.

Dr Madison Leigh Akridge has teamed up with DMN to offer meaningful dialogue and understanding about the rich world of spiritual coaching. We are both honoured to feature Kate's final contribution in our collection of essays, *Case Studies in Spiritual Coaching: A Survey Across Life, Wellness, and Work Domains*. ■

We pay tribute to Dr Anthony on the Online Therapy Institute website at: **www.onlinetherapyinstitute.com/kate**

This article is based on material that appears in Nagel DM, Akridge ML. (eds). Case studies in spiritual coaching: a survey across life, wellness and work domains. Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Publishers; 2023. Reproduced with kind permission of the publisher.

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# *Research* digest

*In this issue, **Xeni Kontogianni** investigates the latest research on the transformative role of artificial intelligence (AI) in coaching and therapy*

Coaching and therapy offer valuable support, guidance, and treatment for individuals experiencing a wide range of emotional and psychological challenges. However, the demand for such services recently has outpaced the availability of practitioners, leading to long waiting lists and limited access. Artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to address these challenges and provide accessible and effective solutions.

In the fields of coaching and therapy, AI apps provide resources for psychoeducational content and monitoring activities, as well as delivering therapies based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). At the same time, AI chatbots are offering conversational therapy and conducting initial assessment interviews. Here, I explore the role of AI in coaching and therapy, reviewing studies on its potential to enhance therapeutic outcomes or even threaten the most essential elements of talking therapy – the human-to-human relationship.

## Review

The NHS has recently granted provisional approval to a number of AI apps, pending further examination of the outcomes and feedback from users.[1] Certain apps were suggested for use alongside the support of a high-intensity therapist, particularly in cases involving anxiety disorders, and online CBT programmes designed for depression have been developed to be used also with the support of a therapist. Nevertheless, the research to determine which individuals might derive the greatest advantages from AI apps has not yet reached a level that would permit their widespread implementation. Another problem is that patients do not use these apps consistently or lose patience and drop out from the therapeutic process.

AI-driven interventions, such as chatbots and mobile applications, provide users with immediate access to mental healthcare, offering interventions grounded in evidence-based therapies. AI chatbots can engage users in conversation, deliver psychoeducation and provide coping strategies for many conditions. Their advantage lies in their accessibility and round-the-clock availability, allowing users to seek help at their convenience. For example, 'Woebot', a mental health chatbot, uses natural language processing and machine learning to deliver CBT. Woebot offers continuous support to users, helping them manage symptoms of anxiety, depression and stress. AI-powered interventions can also provide continuous monitoring of an individual's psychological state.

**The role of AI in coaching and psychotherapy is rapidly evolving, offering promising solutions to long-standing challenges in the field**

When fed a transcript of a therapy session, the AI programme 'Lyssn' could detect more than 50 metrics of therapy quality, such as provider empathy, active listening and engagement.[2] By analysing user interactions and responses, these systems can track changes in symptoms and offer timely feedback.

Several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of AI interventions, making them a valuable addition to coaching and therapy services. A meta-study by Gaffney et al. examined the ability of conversational AI agents to treat mental health problems.[3] The results of this examination revealed that all 13 scrutinised studies reported some degree of reduction in psychological distress. Among these, five studies exhibited notable reductions in psychological distress when compared to control groups, while three studies did not show superior effects. Another review by Rebelo et al. on the impact of AI on the tasks of psychological assessment and screening found that AI systems could detect suicidal tendencies, depression, and autism which could speed up screening of patients and find new paths of further inquiry.[4]

Human coaching most often focuses on improving goal attainment, psychological wellbeing, resilience, and reduce stress. A study by Terblanche et al. examined the extent that AI chatbot, 'Vici', could also improve these aspects of coaching.[5] Vici supports users in setting and achieving their goals, keeping track of progress, and making necessary adjustments along the way. The study gathered data on various aspects, such as goal accomplishment, resilience, psychological wellbeing, and perceived stress. Findings revealed that the experimental group exhibited a noteworthy increase in goal achievement, whereas the remaining measures did not yield statistically significant outcomes.

A popular AI app, ChatGPT 4.0, has been often used to provide coaching advice. A study by Blyler and Seligman fed ChatGPT with several narratives describing the behaviours of individuals struggling with emotional problems and asked the app to propose specific interventions.[6] They found that ChatGPT-4 effectively produced personalised coaching interventions based on individual narratives. The authors concluded that this technology allows human coaches/therapists to allocate more time towards establishing goals, monitoring progress, and making necessary adjustments during their sessions with clients.

AI virtual therapists have also been designed to mimic human therapists, offering empathetic

and non-judgmental interactions. Virtual therapists can provide people with support in maintaining progress and implementing therapeutic strategies in their daily lives. An ongoing international project, which has shown encouraging initial outcomes, has delved into avatar-based therapy for people with auditory hallucinations.[7] The virtual therapist aids them in effectively managing the voices they hear and questioning the content of these voices. Initially patients construct an avatar representing the entity communicating with them, after which they are encouraged to confront the adverse statements voiced by the avatar. Subsequent therapy sessions could assist them in bolstering their self-assurance.

In New Zealand, for almost a decade, the Ministry of Health has provided financial support to SPARX, an e-therapy programme using gaming elements for adolescents grappling with depression.[8] This initiative aims to address the escalating demand for psychological assistance among young people. SPARX comprises seven therapy stages aligned with various educational objectives, such as problem-solving, recognising negative thought patterns and converting them into more positive ones, and acquiring the ability to endure them. Subsequently, participants re-engage with the programme, and the guide offers personalised challenges for the week, mirroring the homework approach commonly found in CBT.

## Concerns

The application of AI in coaching is a relatively new field, and research is ongoing. However, there are studies and discussions that touch upon limitations and challenges associated with AI in mental healthcare, including coaching-related contexts[9,10]:

- **Limited empathy and emotional understanding:** AI lacks true empathy and emotional understanding, which are crucial in coaching and therapy. Studies have highlighted that although AI can measure metrics of empathy, it may not provide the depth of emotional support that humans can offer
- **Contextual understanding:** AI systems may struggle to fully grasp the nuances and context of an individual's life, which is often essential in coaching sessions that deal with personal and complex issues. This limitation can result in responses that feel generic or disconnected from the user's unique circumstances
- **Oversimplification of complex issues:** AI-driven interventions often provide standardised responses and interventions. While this simplicity can be effective for some users, it may oversimplify complex emotional or psychological problems that require more nuanced and individualised approaches
- **Risk of misdiagnosis and inaccurate assessments:** AI systems, including diagnostic tools, may provide inaccurate assessments, potentially leading to misdiagnosis or inappropriate treatment recommendations. Ensuring the reliability of AI algorithms is a major concern
- **Ethical considerations:** Ensuring data privacy and security is paramount, as sensitive mental health information may be at risk. Robust safeguards and encryption must be in place to protect user privacy and maintain confidentiality.

O'Connor and Kasket highlight another issue regarding the speed at which these applications respond, potentially reducing the duration of discomfort people can endure when seeking guidance and support.[11] Over time, there is a risk that people might lower their threshold for discomfort, potentially missing out on opportunities for personal growth if they were better equipped to handle such moments.

## Conclusions

The role of AI in coaching and psychotherapy is rapidly evolving, offering promising solutions to long-standing challenges in the field. These advancements have the potential to change mental health care by increasing accessibility, improving outcomes and reducing stigma. Most studies have asserted that AI is unlikely to fully replace coaching and therapy practitioners in the future. Both disciplines involve multifaceted processes that hinge on establishing trust and rapport between a therapist and a client – an area where AI still lags behind human therapists.

Nonetheless, AI has the potential to complement therapy in several ways. For instance, AI can help practitioners with 'behind-the-scenes' tasks, such as taking notes, formulating cases, conducting initial interviews and running assessment questionnaires. Additionally, AI has the capacity to contribute to continuing professional development by providing valuable feedback to practitioners regarding their performance, identifying areas of strength and areas that need improvement. It can also facilitate feedback from clients regarding their progress with assigned homework and other activities throughout the week.

As AI technology continues to advance, ongoing research and collaboration between AI developers and human practitioners will be crucial to maximise the benefits of AI, while addressing potential ethical and privacy concerns. As we move forward, it is essential to maintain a balance between technological innovation and the human touch that is at the heart of effective therapy and coaching. This synergy between AI and human practitioners will shape the future of mental healthcare, providing a holistic approach that meets the diverse needs of individuals seeking support. ■


### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Xeni Kontogianni** is an Executive member of BACP Coaching. Currently studying at the University of Amsterdam and participating in leadership research projects, she is committed to bridging the gap between academia and practice and applying modern scientific methodologies.


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# **Coaching in practice:** integrated coaching and mentoring for first-time CEOs

***David Roche***

*is an executive coach/mentor for first-time CEOs. A qualified coach with a psychology degree, David has decades of senior board experience, and he continues to chair organisations, consult and lecture. His second book,* Become a Successful First-Time CEO, *was published in March 2024.*

**www.greyareacoaching.com**

### What is the approach you use in coaching (the theoretical model, its premises/underlying beliefs or reasons for being developed etc)?

My coaching approach depends on the individual client and what their needs are. If their presenting issue is predominantly task-related, I may adopt the GROW model (Grow, Reality, Options, Will) and if it is relationship-based, it may be more CLEAR (Contract, Listen, Explore, Action, Review).

I integrate coaching with mentoring – hence the 'grey area' in my company name – and dial that up or down in a bespoke fashion depending on the client, the circumstances and the time frame.

CEOs are busy people and they welcome the mentoring aspect from someone whose own experience they respect. On many occasions, the first request in our sessions might be something like 'Can we discuss the board meeting next week as my boss is coming over from the States…?'. There is often a particular problem in the near future that is taking all their attention and is all that they want to talk about at that point in time. Combining coaching with mentoring allows greater flexibility for this and, in my experience, produces better results in a more pragmatic fashion. Encouraging a longer-term relationship with the client helps to ensure they remain on a learning journey that enables them to stand on their own two feet.

### Why were you drawn to this approach/model and how did you go about becoming skilled/qualified in it?

I was drawn to coaching originally in order to improve my non-executive director skills as I perceived the disciplines were similar, in terms of asking powerful questions, providing challenge as well as support, and active listening. When I became a Chair for the first time, I found these skills invaluable.

I had done a lot of mentoring over the years and found coaching very satisfying, with a lot of rewards for both the coachee and myself. I was always being asked to talk to people who had a problem or to help with the development of people nearer the beginning of their careers, as well as being a sounding board for peers in other companies and industries. I particularly enjoyed working with people from different backgrounds and helping those who found my industry, publishing, a strange world that they had no experience of, or connections in. Adding a professional executive coaching and mentoring service to my portfolio was a natural extension of what I was doing, and was something I knew I would enjoy and learn lots from. I was a little nervous at the start but discovered I was good at it too.

I dial the mentoring up or down depending on the individual and the circumstances, but always stick to the principle of ensuring the

ownership for the goals and actions is firmly with my client. Injecting the right balance of mentoring comes with practice and is a skilled process.

I try to avoid coaching in industry sectors that I have a lot of experience in so I will bring less baggage and fewer assumptions. Both the coaching and mentoring then is more generic and based on the patterns that emerge. I find that the less I know about the industry, often the clearer the patterns are as to what the issues might really be. First-time CEOs have similar issues in every sector, by and large.

Mentoring gives me the opportunity to use my 30 years on boards as a president, Chair, CEO, exec director and trustee. In writing my book, I looked back and realised that I now had a different perspective on things that had happened to me or that I did, and perhaps riled me at the time. If I had known then what I know now, I would definitely have played it differently in many cases. Some innate learning and changed behaviours are evident in my career but I'm not sure how much I had analysed what was going on at the time and planned accordingly for the next time round.

**I believe passionately that professional independent coaching and mentoring should become compulsory for every first-time CEO**

### Do you work with a particular client group and how do your clients benefit from the fact that you take this particular approach to coaching?

I work with first-time CEOs as I believe that is an area that is totally underserved, and where failure is most prevalent and preventable. According to the Harvard Business Review, two out of five CEOs fail in their first 18 months[1], and it's not their expertise or experience to blame, it's their poor people skills, lack of political nous and inability to build the necessary relationships with the key points of contact in their business.

My recent book[2] delves into all the key relationships and how to manage them. It's full of anecdotes from both my time as a first-time CEO and stories from other CEOs who kindly submitted them for the book. My favoured method of learning is definitely through case studies and stories that illustrate the concepts you are trying to grasp, and it would appear that many readers of my book react in the same way. More often than not, it's the stories of failing and how not to do something that stick in the mind the longest.

### What do you most love about being this kind of coach? Have you experienced this kind of coaching in your life and how does it resource you as a practitioner?

I had a coach when I was a first-time CEO and they were invaluable. To know that you had the answers all the time, though you needed help to get to them, was a nice realisation to have. Most first-time CEOs do not receive any support in their transition and believe they are expected to have all the answers. McKinsey estimates that $1 trillion of market capital is lost every year from S&P's top 1,500 companies as a result of poorly managed CEO transitions.[3]

I believe passionately that professional independent coaching and mentoring should become compulsory for every first-time CEO. It's a relatively minor investment but with a major, long-term payback, both commercially and personally, that in turn shapes the next generation of leaders that the world needs.

### Could you share a tool or framework or aspect of this approach that other coaches might be able to use or draw on now in their work with clients?

When coaching is taking its time, some clients can still be blocked. It's at this point that I might say 'Let me tell you about something similar that happened to me…' I then relate a story from my own experience and before I have got half way, the client inevitably snaps their fingers and says something along the lines of 'Stop! Something you said sparked the answer for what I need to do…'. This answer is possibly buried in incubation effect, storytelling or reflective practice, and I think this works as a result of being immersed in their own problems but simultaneously going into problem-solving mode as a result of placing themselves in my shoes, facing the problems that I faced. We know it's often easier to solve others' problems than our own. These lightbulb moments happen far too regularly to be a coincidence and it's wonderful to watch. When problems appear to be insurmountable, solutions such as this can appear miraculous.

I also offer a retainer-type service where clients can contact me between sessions if there's anything particular or urgent that they wish to discuss. It's actually rarely used in practice but it gives clients reassurance that the support I provide is unconditional and available whenever needed, and that alone gives them confidence.

### If people are interested in finding out more, what can they read or where could they explore it through CPD or fully train in it?

My new book, *Become a Successful First-Time CEO*[2], is full of advice, anecdotes and stories. It examines what I call the 'CEO winner's circle', which is the key relationships both inside and outside the company. There is no right way to conduct all the relationships CEOs need to be successful, so it's more of a 'Why to…' book than a 'How to…' book.

There are also a number of articles and interviews in the business press around the book's key concepts, such as overcoming stress; collaborating for success; why people skills are more important than technical abilities; and the value of having an independent coach and mentor in your corner. Links can be found on the media page of my website at **https://greyareacoaching.co.uk/#updates** ■


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# Life wants to live:

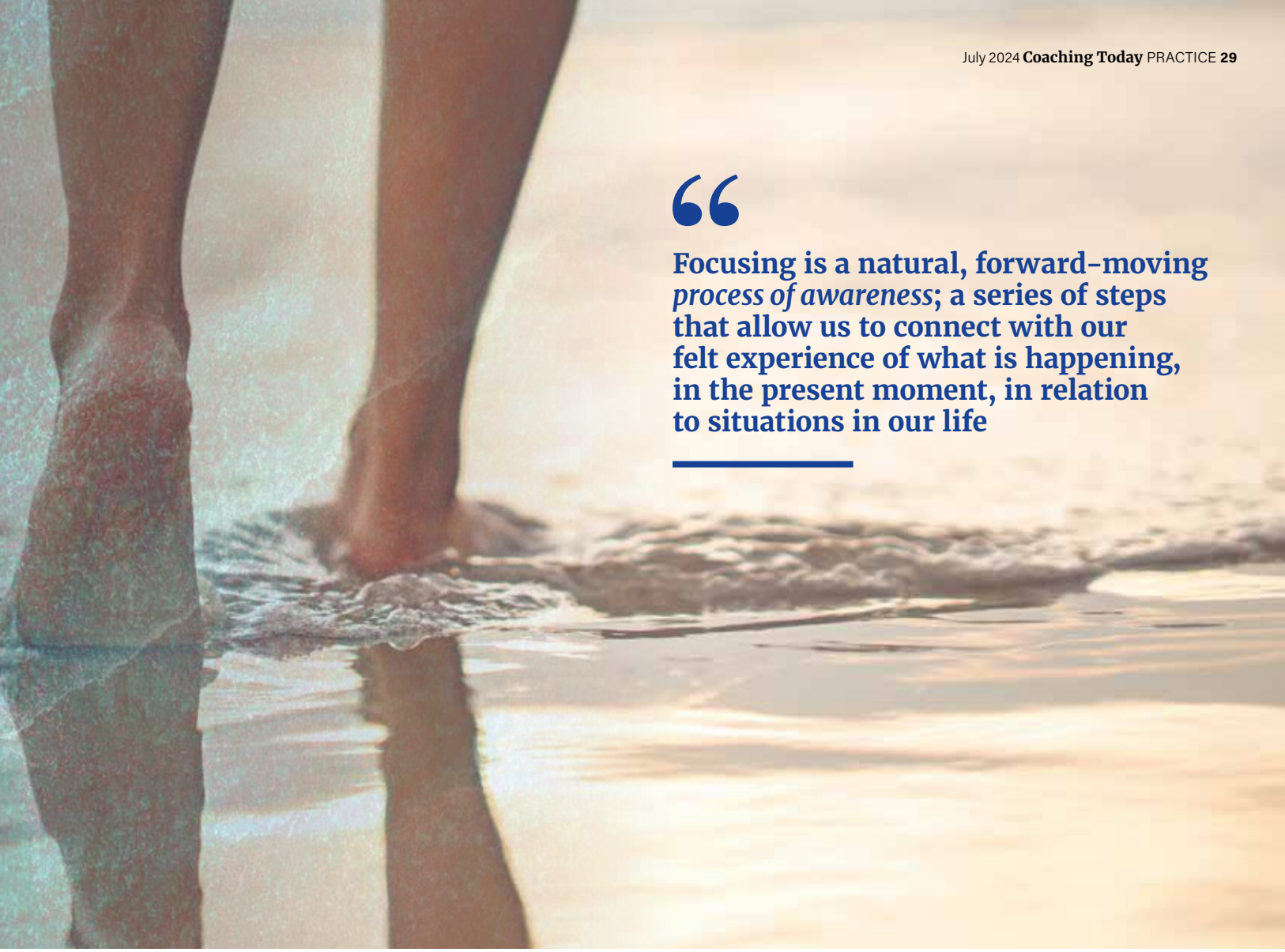
## focusing-oriented coaching

Coach **Báirbre Meehan** explores the deep synergy between coaching and the body-oriented practice of focusing, and offers a practical guide to coaching with a focusing approach

As a practising coach, reading Eugene Gendlin's seminal 1978 book *Focusing*[1] marked a significant turning point in my personal and professional life. I was intrigued by the focusing process, and by how natural it feels in the body. Over time and with practice, I discovered that the process of change actually feels good, in contrast with my well-worn paths of intellectual analysing, reliving old emotions or avoiding feelings altogether.

Focusing is the inner compass with which I navigate my life and my relationships, allowing me to live from a place that is deeper and truer than just my thoughts and feelings. Focusing has taught me self-compassion – to listen to myself more deeply, to trust what my body offers and to honour each and all of the parts of myself.

As focusing naturally flowed into my coaching work, I unwittingly role-modelled the focusing presence for my clients. Enthused by the call-and-response of this way of working, I learned to walk the fine line between supporting clients to connect inwardly, and trusting that their body knows the right next step. Coaching in a focusing-oriented way is about being fully present to your client as they get in touch with and acknowledge parts of themselves that may not be possible for them to get in touch with alone. As clients develop



> **Focusing is a natural, forward-moving *process of awareness*; a series of steps that allow us to connect with our felt experience of what is happening, in the present moment, in relation to situations in our life**

the capacity to create a space in which to connect with the felt sense of their coaching agenda, I am constantly reminded what it really means to be human and to simply be… one human being with another.

## The origins of focusing

In the 1950s, US psychologist Carl Rogers was revolutionising psychotherapy with his 'person-centred' approach and leading a mammoth study at the University of Chicago to assess the correlation between the therapist core conditions (empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard) and successful therapeutic outcomes. At the same time, philosophy student Eugene Gendlin was passionately pursuing the question *'How do we symbolise our experience?'*. In Rogers' study, Gendlin saw an opportunity to deepen his understanding of this question by directly observing numerous clients, and so he joined Rogers, who trained him in 'non-directive' therapy.[2]

The research results were surprising in that they did not conclude, as expected, that the therapist conditions led to higher processing levels in the client, which in turn led to successful therapeutic outcomes. Instead, the results showed that some clients have a pre-existing capacity for accessing and 'checking-back' into their bodily-felt experience. Results were so conclusive that psychotherapy students listening to recordings of clients' first two therapy sessions could correctly identify those clients who would have a successful therapeutic outcome, by simply observing the presence or absence of clients' bodily-felt experiencing capacity.

Focusing is a skill that comes naturally to some of us but is teachable to everyone. Gendlin did not *create* the focusing process; he observed it taking place naturally and bolstered by these research outcomes, he went on to publish his 1978 book *Focusing*[1] which laid out a step-by-step guide to accessing and working, with the bodily-felt experience to create forward-moving life changes.

## What is focusing?

Focusing is a natural, forward-moving *process of awareness*; a series of steps that allow us to connect with our felt experience of what is happening, in the present moment, in relation to situations in our life. We each have within us the capacity to create a space from which we can connect with our felt sense of a given situation, helping us understand much more about the complexities of what is happening in our lives, and in doing so, deepen our understanding of ourselves.

Focusing centres around two key elements: *focusing presence* and *felt sense*.

A 'focusing presence' is a kind of inward attention that enables a felt sense to form, and that allows us to stay connected with the felt sense through the many unfolding change steps of the focusing process. The focusing presence can be explained using the analogy of creating a climate where things can grow, like plants growing in a greenhouse in winter. Much as the greenhouse protects the plants from the harsh elements of frost, strong winds and heavy rain, the focusing presence creates a safe space for our inner experience, protected from the harsh internal elements of self-doubt, judgment, dismissal and self-criticism.

Although the term 'felt sense' was first coined by Gendlin, the felt sense itself has existed for as long as we have. We experience felt senses often in our lives, whether or not we are aware of or connected to them. Think of:

- a piercing pain in your heart, following the death of a loved one;
- a swelling in your chest of warm expansive aliveness, as you breathe in the sensuous aroma of wild flowers on a spring morning;
- a black pounding gripping dread in your chest as you catch a glimpse of the class bully, decades later.

Every felt sense is different and every one unique and precisely so.

Focusing is a series of steps through which the felt sense naturally unfolds and emerges, with one step unlocking the next, each bringing fresh insights and clarity. A felt sense may take a while to reveal itself, most often arriving initially as a subtle sensation or feeling but as we form a relationship with it, we allow that felt sense to come into view and reveal its next step. As each step unfolds, the body offers something new: a sensation, a feeling, an image, a movement, a gesture, a memory or a thought, each revealing more about our inner experience.

Getting a felt sense can feel like being at the edge of something, which we cannot yet articulate or put into words. Gendlin used the analogy of a poet struggling to find the last line of his poem. He sits with it and different lines come, and with time and checking back in with the felt sense, finally the right words emerge, and with them a sense of relief or 'rightness'. When we capture the felt sense precisely, the resonance is felt in our bodies, facilitating the next step. The felt sense always knows the next step and so it carries forward spontaneously, naturally unfolding, one step implying the next. We never tell the felt sense what it needs to do or be, we never intervene, rather we simply allow the felt sense to be just as it is, trusting that it knows the right next step.

> 'A felt sense is not a mental experience but a physical one. Physical. A bodily awareness of a situation or person or event. An internal aura that encompasses everything you feel and know about a given subject at a given time: encompasses it and communicates it to you all at once, rather than detail by detail.'[1] (p37)

Often the steps are small but sometimes a large step – a *felt shift* – follows a series of smaller steps. A felt shift brings clarity, relief and an inner easing about this particular life situation, together with new ways of making sense of old patterns. Our body feels the deep truth and trusts the permanency of the change occurring inside, as we arrive at new understandings of ourselves.

## The synergy between focusing and coaching

Coaching and focusing are optimistic ways of working, based on the expectation of positive change. Gendlin's expression, 'Life wants to live', speaks to life having its own natural forward direction, '…whatever else might also be going on.'[1] In both focusing and coaching, we share the belief that the client's answers will naturally emerge when we listen deeply to what is going on, trust the client's internal knowing and life's natural forward direction.

It takes practice for coaches to experience and trust the focusing process but with a desire to learn, we experience the natural ease with which the crossing between focusing and coaching unfolds. In addition to the new perspectives that focusing brings to our coaching, we are gifted with an understanding of what it means to listen deeply.

Similarities between coaching and focusing include:

- **A forward moving agenda.** The first step in coaching is a forward moving agenda, while the fundamental premise of why focusing works is that the life energy within us implies the next step. As the client connects to the felt experience of their agenda, we find both the blocked energy and the forward moving energy, which together hold the focusing, change step
- **Acceptance of 'what is'.** A deep belief that whatever is there is there for a reason, and once felt and acknowledged fully, change will naturally occur, emerge or find its right next step
- **Trusting the client to find their own answers.** In both coaching and focusing, the coach's role is to create the safe space and use the skills to support the client to connect inwardly to their own truth, suspending personal interference, so we can be fully present for our client

- **Commonality of the skills necessary for 'what is' to emerge.** The key skills of slowing the pace, deep listening, reflecting back empathetically, acknowledging what's here, offering encouragement and bringing the conversation into and holding it in, the here and now
- **Importance of the relationship.** When we feel safe and supported our capacity to connect inwardly increases and feeling held in the relationship, our ability to listen to and hear ourselves are enhanced
- **Primacy of human presence.** Above all else, what is needed for forward movement to naturally occur is to be listened to and acknowledged by another human being. We do this by being fully present to ourselves and our client, connected yet unattached to, our own life experiences.

## What is focusing-oriented coaching?

Focusing-oriented coaching is a coaching approach in which the coach is always oriented towards the felt *experience* of their client. Here, the coach is not expressly teaching focusing but rather holding a space for the client's experience to emerge, supporting the client to connect inwardly and in doing so, enabling them to articulate their in-the-moment experience of their coaching agenda, from where fresh insights and new understanding unfold, eliciting increased self-compassion and natural forward-moving energy.

In focusing-oriented coaching, the coach creates an environment that allows the client to feel safe and supported, inviting them to pause and 'be' in their body, connecting inward to whatever is already there or what might come in response to the client's coaching agenda.

The coach encourages the client to be fully present to anything and everything that may arise in response to their coaching agenda; the 'all of that' felt experience. In order for the client to trust what comes in their bodies, the coach must role-model presence; guiding, reassuring, pointing towards the unfolding steps of awareness, using their knowledge of the focusing process to help the client move through change steps.

The coach encourages the client to speak out their fresh living experience, however inarticulate, so that both coach and client can be with the unfolding experience. The coach repeats back key words and feelings precisely, supporting the client to check the resonance of what is repeated back, against their inner experience. In the hearing back and checking the rightness or not quite rightness of what has been articulated, increasing clarity emerges. As the client continues to feel safe and supported, and with this increasing implicit precision and clarity, the inner space expands and they connect with their felt sense more easily and more deeply and so, the focusing process unfolds.

The coach's key role is to help the client stay connected to their felt sense, to notice when they lose connection and help the client reconnect with their felt sense, while being fully present and compassionate to what emerges. It may seem like the coach has little to 'do' and on one level, that is true, but the coach's presence and their lived understanding of the focusing process, are vital in helping the client stay connected to their inner experience.

A focusing-oriented coach must have a deep understanding of focusing, through experience and practice of being with the inner experience of their own life situations. Having this allows them to:

1. Understand the client's process, recognise when the client has lost connection with their felt sense, identify change steps or felt shifts and trust in the naturally unfolding process
2. Find the balance between offering support and trusting the client's capacity to directly relate to their unfolding experience, and
3. Be with whatever emerges inside them, in order to be fully present to the client, the client's process and clear the interactive space between coach and client.

As the session concludes, the focusing-oriented coach supports the client to articulate their sense of how their focusing experience informs and creates forward movement in their coaching agenda. They reassure the client of the permanency of the focusing change steps that have taken place, and invite them to consider additional action steps that promote thought and behavioural changes in their lives.

> **Getting a felt sense can feel like being at the edge of something, which we cannot yet articulate or put into words**

## Focusing-oriented coaching in practice

The following client example illustrates focusing-oriented coaching in practice.

Client talks about a recent explosive interaction with a challenging work colleague
Coaching agenda is: *identify practical steps towards a respectful and positive relationship*

### 1. An invitation to a different way of being

For a felt sense of our coaching agenda to form, both the coach and client must adopt a focusing presence; beginning with a pause, slowing down and coming into our bodies. We turn our attention inward to create an open and compassionate space, so we can allow our in-the-moment, lived experience of our agenda to form.

Coach supports the client to invite a felt sense of 'all of that' situation

### 2. Forming a relationship with the felt sense

In some situations, a felt sense is already there or may emerge as a strong response to the client's agenda, but often it can take time to show itself. As we welcome whatever is there, we create a safe space for a felt sense to slowly form. Initially we might notice a subtle sensation or feeling, a 'something' that has an unclear vagueness to it but as we turn towards and form a relationship with it, we allow that felt sense to come into view.

Client articulates that there is *'something in my stomach ... a sickness feeling ... like bubbles fizzing'*

### 3. Repeating back and checking for rightness

Getting a felt sense can feel like being at the edge of something, which we cannot yet articulate or put into words. We stay at the edge of this something, simply allowing it space and sensing inward, from where the felt sense comes more fully into view offering more; maybe a word or an image. The focusing presence creates this unique interaction, as the coach empathetically repeats back and the client checks for rightness, bringing implicit precision and in turn, the next step.

Coach repeats back client's words
Client checks with the felt sense and the words *'bubbling up'* come **[Change step]**
Client stays with *'bubbling up'* and gets an image of a pressure cooker **[Change step]**
Client feels energy releasing upward, concentrated towards a specific area in their chest and describing that sensation, they get a sense that there is so much already in this pressure cooker and the 'lid could blow' **[Change step]**

### 4. Finding the right distance to be with 'all of that' situation

Forming a relationship with the felt sense allows coach and client to be *with* but not *in* whatever comes. This allows us to separate from what is happening inside us, offering the opportunity to 'widen the lens'. A felt sense is not an emotion; it is bigger than an emotion and as we support the client to find the right distance, they sense so much more than just the emotion (anger, in this example) as the unfolding felt sense gathers up the totality of the situation.

Client feels anger and as the coach supports the client to find the right distance to be with this anger, what comes is not just the recent interaction but all the times this work colleague 'sneered' and 'looked down' on them. **[Change step]**
Coach repeats back and client checks the emerging felt sense. Words come: *Slighted?* No. *Small?* No. *Not seen?* No. *Unseen?* Yes! That's it and precisely so ... *Unseen!* **[Change step]**
Client feels tenderness in their chest and articulates this *Unseen* feeling, with tears and self-compassion **[Change step]**
Fresh energy releases and flows upwards through the client's body, together with a flood of realisations, specific to them, nothing to do with their colleague, like a recurring pattern in their other relationships, a background feeling in their life, or maybe memories from their childhood. **[Felt shift]**

### 5. Revisiting the client's agenda

The understanding, clarity, self-compassion and energy release are experienced in a visceral way. New energy flows naturally, and the client experiences a deep sense of rightness and knowing. The coach must reassure the client to trust the bodily changes that have taken place, and the next steps that are already implied in their new bodily understanding. They invite the client to revisit their agenda, supporting them to articulate the sense-making, while enquiring about practical next steps.

> **We feel more than we can think, and we live more than we can feel**

> 'Experiencing is a myriad richness that exceeds any number of separated facets. There is vastly more than our conceptual structures can encompass. And experiencing moves; we cannot think all that just was. We feel more than we can think, and we live more than we can feel. And if we enter into what we feel in certain genuine steps, we feel more than before. And there is much more still.'[3]

Focusing-oriented coaching is a powerful way of working. As we learn to trust the focusing process, both we and our clients are gifted with increased self-compassion, greater understanding of ourselves and a deepening trust in the wisdom of our bodies. ■



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Báirbre Meehan** is a focusing-oriented coach and coach supervisor. Her practice is informed by 25 years in people management in roles such as CEO, organisational/leadership development and finance director. Her coaching journey began 12 years ago, when her personal development journey led her to focusing and from there the integration of these powerful ways of working naturally emerged. Báirbre self-funded a research project measuring the impact of a focusing-oriented coaching approach on people with low mental wellbeing (MWB). Referrals came from medical doctors, psychotherapists and word of mouth and quantitative measurements showed significant MWB improvements, maintained over the longer term.

Focusing-oriented coaching is Báirbre's passion and she is devoted to developing and sharing it with others. Báirbre regularly runs focusing-oriented coaching programmes. To find out more, contact Báirbre via her website: **www.pause.ie**

## REFERENCES

**1** Gendlin E. Focusing. New York: Bantam; 1978.
**2** Purton C. Person-centred therapy: the focusing-oriented approach. London: Palgrave MacMillan; 2004.
**3** Gendlin E. Focusing. Unpublished early draft; 1978.

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