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The role of mindfulness in coaching

Abstract

In this article we explore the concept of mindfulness as a tool for helping both coaches and coachees. We argue that coaching practice of the coach can be enhanced through using mindfulness as a preparation tool. We highlight research evidence on mindfulness impact in managing stress and contributing towards improved performance. We argue that coachees too can benefit when the coach shares with the coachee these techniques.

Key words

Coaching psychology, Mindfulness, Meditation, Emotional detachment, Performance at work, Focus, Managing stress, Managing emotions & breathing.

Introduction

The challenge of developing and maintaining focus is one which has been raised in the coaching and counselling literature (Passmore, 2006a & 2007b). The coach or therapist often see a number of coachees during the course of a day and need to balance these demands with the many other demand of a consultant psychologist. The recent BBC TV comedy series, *Help*, joked about the therapist thinking about his shopping list as he nodded and pretended to listen to his client. The comedy of the situation is that there is a grain of truth in the joke. As humans we often struggle to maintain the single minded focus which our friends and clients deserve. So how do we improve our focused attention on our coachees during coaching meetings? How do we manage the emotions which we feel, left over from the day before or the meeting before? How do we try to manage the emotions aroused during our coaching session?

This article explores the role of mindfulness in coaching, as a tool to help the coach both develop and maintain focus within the coaching session, and as a technique to manage emotional detachment. It also suggests ways in which the coach could usefully teach mindfulness to coachees as a way of developing resilience and as a tool for managing stress.

What is mindfulness?

It's not that mindfulness is the "answer" to all life's problems. Rather, it is that all life's problems can be seen more clearly through the lens of a clear mind.

(Kabat-Zinn, 1990, pg. 25)

Mindfulness is a practice that has long been proved to promote health and well-being among medical patients and healthy individuals (Shapiro, Schwartz & Bonner, 1998; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). It is a practice with its roots in Buddhist and other meditative traditions, which teaches the art of “non-doing” to facilitate absorbing reality “as is” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness cultivates conscious attention and awareness of the moment in a non-judgemental way.

We assume we know and understand the world that surrounds us. However, this is purely an illusion! On average we can process 5 to 9 items of the several millions stimuli that surround us (Miller, 1956). This creates a limited picture of the world that we mistake for reality. Mindfulness provides a break from the limitations of our mental models and promotes a form of pure exploration, a way of investigating reality that challenges our sense of safety derived by the illusion and the safety of “knowing”. Mindfulness is a window on reality, a channel to the realisation and acceptance of the “not-knowing”, a lens that shows the world “as is”.

Mindfulness can be learnt and cultivated by anybody through practice and dedication. Research shows that it is composed by at least four elements: awareness, attention (Brown and Ryan, 2003), time (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) and acceptance (Gunaratana, 1993). Awareness is the brain’s ability to constantly monitor and recognize internal and external systems and stimuli. Attention is the brain’s ability to focus the awareness to a specific phenomenon and so increasing the sensitivity to it. Time refers to “the now”; the only place where we exist, experience and act. Acceptance represents our ability to let-go and to be non-judgemental;

our ability to observe and absorb reality “as is”, without embarrassment, satisfaction or disappointment.

Mindfulness increases our ability to live a fuller life by allowing us to own our lives moment by moment, as they unfold, in joy or in pain, in our relationships with others and ourselves, in our private and professional lives.

Mindfulness research

When you feel physically and mentally disturbed, the best thing you can do is to let go, relax, and still the wheels of your thought processes. Talk to your subconscious mind. Tell it to take over in peace, harmony, and divine order. You will find that all the functions of your body will become normal again.

(Murphy, 2000, pg. 42)

Mindfulness research has focused broadly on the fields of health and well-being. Its application has proven very effective in the reduction of stress, pain, anxiety and depression, but its overall positive impact proves effective even for healthy individuals (Shapiro, Schwartz & Bonner, 1998; Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

The following research-review presents some evidence about the positive influences that mindfulness brings at a psychological, physiological and behavioural level. The reader should also consider that the coach and the coachee are both, first and foremost, two individuals with their own experiences of stress and happiness. Seen in this light this evidence shows a first step into integrating mindfulness into coaching.

Stress can be defined in several ways. One widely accepted model Lazarus & Folkman’s Transactional Model (1984). In this model stress is seen as the interaction between the environment and the individual as moderated by their appraisal, acceptance and coping strategies. As stated earlier, awareness and acceptance are also central concepts to mindfulness and this is the reason why mindfulness is so effective, it influences directly upon the mechanisms that make us feel stressed.

The concept of mindfulness can now be found in the corporate, medical, counselling and recreational worlds, with organisations training their staff in both the potential benefits and key techniques, as a way of managing conflict and stress in the workplace.

In a study with Motorola Barrios-Choplin and colleagues (1997) found that in addition to physiological benefits, contentment, job satisfaction, and communication significantly increased after the mindfulness training, while tension, anxiety, nervousness, and physical symptoms of stress significantly decreased.

Other constructs, such as control (Geer, Davison, Gatchel, 1970), creativity, burnout (Langer, Hefferman and Kiester, 1988), productivity, attentional processes and learning (Langer & Piper, 1987) have all been shown to be positively influenced by mindfulness.

Research into individuals’ health locus of control, state anxiety and mental adjustment found positive results in cancer sufferers who had been trained in the practice of mindfulness (Tacon, Caldera & Ronaghan, 2004). Other studies into the effects of cardiac coherence also

provides supporting evidence for its positive effects on well being. Cardiac coherence is a technique aimed at regulating the heart bit and draws deeply from mindfulness practice. It has been proved to positively affect brain faculties (Watkins, 2002) and other physiological and psychological functions; blood pressure, cortisol levels and IgA levels are among some of them.

Blood pressure was significantly lowered in a study of 38 hypertensive employees within a large corporation, over a period of 3 months (McCraty, 2003) and in a study of 27 employees from Motorola, where a reduction in sympathetic nervous activity (Barrios-Choplin et al., 1997) was also found. Cortisol levels were lowered by 23% in another study (McCraty & Barrios-Choplin, 1998; Kirschbaum et al., 1996) and IgA levels increased as a consequence of mindfulness practices, while recollecting positive memories (Rein et al., 1995).

Brain structures and functioning seems to also be affected by mindfulness. In a mindfulness-based, randomised, controlled study within a high-stress biotechnology corporation, Davidson and colleagues (2003) demonstrated an increase of left-side, anterior activation in the brain, previously associated to feelings of happiness and dispositional positive affect (Davidson, 1992; Davidson et al., 1990). This study demonstrated a shift in brain activity from right to left hemisphere, which influenced the ability to feel happier, in contrast with previous beliefs that “trying to be happier is like trying to be taller” (Lykken, 1999).

From a more general perspective, Rosenzweig and colleagues (2003) demonstrated that mindfulness can be an effective stress management intervention. They measured mood disturbance among medical students and assigned a group to mindfulness training and another to a wait-list control group. They found significantly lower mood disturbance scores in the experimental group as compared to the controls.

This evidence shows some of the profound benefits that mindfulness practice can have on individuals from many walks of life. Research has shown that mindfulness can be developed through practice (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and this encourages professionals and academics within many domains to include this practice in their interventions.

The challenge, apart from the obvious benefits of mindfulness reducing stress and improving well-being, is that of finding ways to include mindfulness in the coaching practices. This is what we explore in the following section.

The potential for mindfulness in coaching

Mindfulness can be applied to coaching in a variety of ways. The relationship the two concepts can be explored from several angles: the coach, the coachee and their relationship.

As individuals, both the coach and the coachee can benefit from mindfulness by practicing it in their daily lives, which given the research data suggests that this will contribute to a less stressed and happier experience of life. There are however other areas to incorporate mindfulness in the coaching relationship.

Effective coaching requires the coach to offer each coachee their full focus and attention. This is not always easy when our personal and professional lives have blurred boundaries and the pressures of the two merge into a mix of worries and confusion. Mindfulness provides an answer; it focuses our attention to the only moment that “is”. Here, a much

narrower range of options are available and our resources all of a sudden look adequate to deal with the situation; we can “be” with our coachee.

The experience for the coachee is not dissimilar. They too are caught in the vortex of their own pressures and anxieties and are likely to carry unhelpful baggage that holds back progress in the coaching session. Mindfulness can provide them the opportunity to focus their attention to the session and to their learning, effectively providing the ground for personal development and self-actualisation.

Whether the coach and the coachee choose to include mindfulness in their own individual benefits, their relationship can certainly become more effective because of it.

The coaching relationship and core skills can in see as parallel to those of counselling, although there are some important distinctions. A number of methodologies draw on the principles of mindfulness, including the work of Carl Roger’s and Fritz Perl.

Central to Carl Roger’s humanistic approach were the concepts of Congruence and Empathic understanding (Rogers, 1961). Congruence is a way for the therapist (read – coach) to be true to themselves. Rogers suggests that during this state “the feelings the therapist is experiencing are available to him, available to his awareness, and he is able to live these feelings, be them, and able to communicate them if appropriate” (pg. 61). It is apparent from this quote how central mindfulness is to this concept. Through congruence the coach facilitates psychological growth and provides the environment in which the client can flourish.

Empathy is often described as the ability to “put oneself into somebody else’s shoes”. This implies that a person who is empathic is able to “step-out” of their own reality and match the one of their interlocutor. Mindfulness is yet again at the centre of this process. Being empathic creates a support structure necessary for the client to feel the presence, the support and the understanding of the coach. Being empathic also focuses the attention of the coach on the client’s needs and away from their own perception of them. One of us (Passmore, 2006a) has argued that Roger’s necessary and sufficient conditions are central in developing an effective working relationship between the coach and coachee.

Gestalt is centred on the empathic, moment by moment exploration of the issues as they are raised by the coachee. Bentley has highlighted the value Presence, Phenomenology and Experiment in developing the coaching relationship (Bentley, 2006). These concepts are key to a successful relationship and central to mindfulness. Presence, similar to Rogers’ congruence, refers to the ability to focus attention on the client so to respond as authentically as possible to their needs. The ‘Here and Now’, and ‘Next’ refers to the exploration of the past and the future to inform us on ways to integrate learning in the present, the time when both are alive at the same time. ‘Phenomenology’ is about all that is happening in the session, the observable and the unobservable, both of which can prove very relevant to the development. Sharing what one sees may provide a fresh view and a learning opportunity for both parties. Finally, it is through ‘Experiment’ that the coachee is able to venture into unknown territory, away from their comfort zone and into their learning one. The coach at this stage can be creative and present novel ways to do things in a safe environment.

Presence, Here and Now, and Next, Phenomenology and Experiment all borrow and benefit from a mindful approach. Mindfulness liberates the mind from the constraint of our mental

models, it fosters our ability to “think out of the box” and of the “not-knowing”; it stimulates creativity (Carrington, et al., 1980) and allow us to pay attention “on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally” (Segal, Williams and Teasdale, 2002, pg. 121)

Another central concept to the Gestalt approach to coaching is that of Context. Everything we are involved in as people and as coaches or coachees are heavily dependents and influenced by the context within which it happens. It is important that the coach approaches every session as a new session and not as a continuation of what has been. The coachee, the coach and their relationship constantly develop, it would be easy to become stuck in our perception of reality. Through mindfulness the coach is able to detach from what has taken place so far and enter the session with fresh eyes and a free mind. Only then the worlds of the coach and the coachee can meet and create a context that promotes change and development.

Mindfulness should be part of our daily lives and certainly of the coaching relationship. A state of mind that is present and non-judgemental shows the world as it actually is. This lessens the scope of the problem and increases the power of our resources, allowing for a path to growth and development.

Using mindfulness techniques to aid your coaching practice

The coaching psychologist may use mindfulness techniques in their coaching practice. We suggest four specific uses in preparing to coach, maintaining focus in the session, remaining emotionally detached during the session and teaching mindfulness techniques to the coachee to help them to manage stress and everyday work pressures.

(i) Preparing for coaching

From our personal experiences as coaches, we often rush from one meeting or coaching session to another. Our focus can sometimes be more on ensuring we get to the session on time, or arrive at the right place, without allowing enough time for ourselves to leave behind the thoughts, pressures and anxieties of the day. Mindfulness offers a technique to place these demands aside. One of us (Passmore) uses a four minute mindfulness meditation to help centre ourselves before each coaching session. This four minute meditation involves a series of breathing exercises accompanied by a body-scan to check the bodily sensations being experienced. This is followed by a more practical review of the notes from the previous meeting and planning what the coming session might focus on.

(ii) Maintaining focus in the session

The second potential practical application is in helping the coach to remain focused during the session. We drew attention to the comedy sketch from Help in which the counsellor’s mind wandered during his counselling sessions. As coaches we face the same challenge of a wandering mind. Mindfulness meditations when used between coaching sessions can help improve focus and concentration during two hour sessions. The concept can also be used during coaching sessions through maintaining watchfulness over the mind, and continually bringing it back to focus on the coachee, whenever the mind starts to wander.

(iii) Remaining emotionally detached

The third way which we use mindfulness to is help us manage our changing moods and emotions during a coaching session. As a coach, remaining emotionally detached is a key skill (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). This requires the coach to both experience the emotions being

felt by their coachee, but not to be flooded by them to the point where these emotions prevent the coach helping the coachee to move forward. For example when the coach finds themselves crying at the news of their coachees dismissal, or when the coach over identifies with the experiences of their coachee. To achieve this, while still providing what Hawkins & Smith call 'fearless compassion' in a skill of enabling the coachee to experience coaching as a constructive challenging process rather than simply a supportive conversation.

(iv) Teaching mindfulness to coachees

Mindfulness can be taught formally, as meditative practice, or informally, as an everyday tool. The coach may choose to engage in the formal or informal teaching depending on their clients' needs and experience, however it is important that they have direct, on-going experience with mindfulness practice. While learning clients will experience difficulties and addressing them from a logical, intellectual perspective is not possible. As Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2002) say: "A swimming instructor is not someone who knows the physics of how solids behave in liquids, but he or she knows how to swim". Only through their own practice and understanding will the coach be able to guide their client.

Segal and colleagues also provide suggestions on the skills that should be included in mindfulness teachings:

- Concentration: this is central to mindfulness and represents the ability to focus one's full attention on one object or activity
- Awareness: the conscious knowledge that life is "as is"
- Acceptance: awareness of life is not sufficient, one must accept it and let go
- Decentering: the client's ability to see thoughts just as thoughts and not as truths
- "being" rather than "doing": "doing" means eating the raisin; "being" means eating the raisin and experiencing its taste and the feelings this elicits

Mindfulness is not a skill, but a way of life. Teaching it requires passion, dedication and a strong sense of purpose. Only if inspired, the client will find the strength to change from within.

Summary

In this paper we have shown the nature and research evidence behind a previously discussed but little published area of coaching practice. The evidence suggests that mindfulness can offer benefits both in terms of stress management but also in happiness and focus within our daily lives and in our coaching work. We have also highlighted ways in which the coaching psychologist can draw on this research to begin to make use of the concept of mindfulness in their coaching practice to enhance their focused attention as well as to contribute towards overall performance improvement.

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