COACHING - A USEFUL TOOL OF HANDLING STRONG EMOTION & STRESS FOR ADULTS

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Abstract

In the context of the last social events that concern people all over the world, handling emotion and stress it became a crucial issue for adult life. We are all challenged to adapt to quick changes that occur in society and to a new situation of living, to handle a huge amount of incertitude as much at a society level and an individual level. It became necessary to include in adult lifelong learning different kinds of abilities to cope with changes, to handle strong emotions and to overcome stress. This paper has the purpose to highlight a development method with a high potential of individual transformation and development – COACHING method. The main intention is to reveal the capacity of this method to generate quick transformation in a person's behaviour to cope reasonably fast with emotion and to reduce the level of stress in front of incertitude of life situations. Stress is already considered as a fearful enemy in our society and this paper intent to show useful instruments to understand and overcome this phenomenon called stress. This paper is a conceptual review of some instruments used in coaching, such as understanding and releasing emotions, awareness, solution-oriented mind, building trust in ourselves, that have a relevant impact in handle stress, incertitude and life situation that generates this. Emotional intelligence, personality and psychological maturity are the most frequent consequences of a good coaching process and represent at the same time the main reason to start a process like this.

Keywords: *coaching, stress relief, stress management, burnout*

1. INTRODUCTION

Stress "has become one of the most serious health issues of the 20th century and a worldwide epidemic" ("Workplace Stress", 2018). This is applying for the 21 century, maybe even more, if we counting the recent pandemic situation all the world experienced.

There is a parable of a frog sitting in a pot on the stove. If dropped into a pot of boiling water, a frog would likely notice and try to escape. But when placed in a pot that is slowly approaching a boil, the frog doesn't notice until the water has already reached an unbearable heat—at which point it is too hot for the frog to survive.

Could we notice the boiling signs earlier and even "turn down" the heat?

The answer is yes, we could. If we increase awareness in our lives, we can observe from time body signs and signals that show us when is too much and we have to take a break and to have a mature approach of work that gives us the possibility to balance the effort. It is common sense… Why is then so difficult to put in practice? Why so many intelligent people have problems in handling stress?

At this point, we can use the coaching process and tools to give answers to these questions. Coaching is a process that works with people minds, emotions and actions and following the path of actions we can discover a person pattern of thinking and feeling. Somewhere on this line, we will find the answers we are looking for.

2. IMPACT OF STRESS ON OUR LIFE'S

Stress is the "psychological, physiological and behavioural response by an individual when they perceive a lack of equilibrium between the demands placed upon them and their ability to meet those demands, which, over a period of time, leads to ill-health" (Palmer, 1989).

According to **The American Institute of Stress website,** stress common symptoms include: difficulty sleeping, weight gain or weight loss, stomach pain, irritability, teeth grinding, panic attacks, headaches, difficulty concentrating, sweaty hands or feet, heartburn, excessive sleeping, social isolation, fatigue, nausea, feeling overwhelmed, and obsessive or compulsive behaviour.

Historically, stress acted as a protective mechanism that warned us of danger; a natural reaction that told us when to run. This response is now referred to as the "fight or flight" response, or the "stress response." Stress has remained part of the evolutionary drive because of its usefulness in survival. When used at the right time, stress increases our awareness and improves physical performance in short bursts (Van Duyne, 2003).

But, repetitive exposure of the stress response on our body is proven to lead to long-lasting psychological and physical health issues; these include cardiovascular disease, diabetes, **anxiety** and **depression** ("How Does Stress Affect Us?", 2016).

It seems that in our society it is now used more broadly to refer to the consequences of "excessive stress" placed on any individual, no matter their occupation. When we get to the point of no longer **being able to cope**, we are "burned out," like a candle.

Possible consequences of "excessive stress" and burn-out for a person can be:

1. Stress has been referred to as the "silent killer" as it can cause heart disease, high blood pressure, chest pain, and an irregular heartbeat (Chilnick, 2008).
2. Stress accounts for 30% of all infertility problems. In women, stress can cause spasms in the fallopian tubes and uterus. In men, it can reduce sperm count and cause erectile dysfunction (Bouchez, 2018).
3. Stress can cause weight gain too. The stress hormone cortisol has been found to cause both the accumulation of abdominal fat and the enlargement of fat cells, causing "diseased" fat (Chilnick, 2008).
4. Correlations have been found between stress and the top six causes of death: cancer, lung ailments, heart disease, liver cirrhosis, accidents, and suicide ("How Does Stress Affect Us?", 2016).
5. In children, chronic stress has been found to negatively impact their developmental growth due to a reduction of the growth hormone in the pituitary gland (Van der Kolk, B. et. al., 2007).
6. The word itself, "stress" stems from the Latin word "stringere", meaning "to draw tight" (McEwen, 2003).
7. In the event of chronic stress, dominant hormones are released into our brain. These hormones are intended for short-term emergencies and in the event where they exist for extended periods they can shrink, impair and kill brain cells (Wallenstein, 2003).
8. Stress can increase the likelihood of developing blood clots since the blood prepares itself for injuries and becomes "stickier" (Chilnick, 2008).
9. Chronic stress can place pressure on, and cause damage to arteries and organs. This occurs due to inflation in our bodies caused by cytokines (a result of stress) (McEwen, 2003).
10. Stress is also responsible for altering our blood sugar levels, which can lead to fatigue, hyperglycemia, mood swings, and metabolic syndrome ("How Does Stress Affect Us?", 2016).

The goal of stress management is not to eliminate all stress from our life's, is more to keep stress within an optimal level. For reaching this goal we have to look carefully into our lives and find a healthier lifestyle behaviours that help us to cope with stress properly. There are many strategies to cope with stress. Most of them can be classified in these three categories.

1. Action Orientated Approaches: used to take action to change a stressful situation (learning new skills like communication and assertiveness, set healthy boundaries, time management, build healthy relationships, emotional intelligence, search for professional help).

2. Emotion-oriented approaches: used to change the way we perceive a stressful situation (exploring emotions, reframing life events, cognitive restructuring).

3. Acceptance-oriented approaches: used for dealing with stressful situations you can't control (mindfulness, sport, healthy diet, quality sleep, build resilience, seek social support).

The most important thing is that we, as people, do not react similarly to all stressor stimulus. What serves as a stressor for one person cannot be the same for another one. That means that each person has to find his own functional strategies to keep stress levels under control.

"Manage your energy, not your time" - Tony Schwartz. This is the quote that made Tony Schwartz famous and brings a new element in our attention. Schwartz proclaims in his book, *The power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal* (2003), that most of us are chasing the wrong resource: **hours in the day**. Instead, we should focus on something entirely different: **our energy.** How can we manage our energy in a way that we keep our life fulfil and happy?

The energy level can be broken down in 4 different elements:

- **The Physical energy – the level of health**

Our physical energy naturally serves as the base, says Schwarz. It is going to be very tough to build out your other energies without taking care of your body first. What's most interesting is that up until now, our physical energy is the most discounted element in our day to day lives.

- **The Emotional energy – the quality of energy**

When people are able to take more control of their emotions, they can improve the quality of their energy, regardless of the external pressures they're facing. To do this, they first must become more aware of how they feel at various points during the day and of the impact these emotions have on their effectiveness. Most people realize that they tend to perform best when they're feeling positive energy. Unfortunately, without intermittent recovery, we're not physiologically capable of sustaining highly positive emotions for long periods. Confronted with relentless demands and unexpected challenges, people tend to slip into negative emotions—the fight-or-flight mode—often multiple times in a day. They become irritable and impatient, or anxious and insecure. Such states of mind drain people's energy and cause friction in their relationships. Fight-or-flight emotions also make it impossible to think clearly, logically, and reflectively. (Tony Schwartz, 2003)

- **The Mind Energy – Focus of Energy**

Multitasking it actually undermines productivity. A temporary shift in attention from one task to another—stopping to answer an e-mail or take a phone call, for instance—increases the amount of time necessary to finish the primary task by as much as 25%, a phenomenon known as "switching time." It's far more efficient to fully focus for 90 to 120 minutes, take a true break, and then fully focus on the next activity. (Tony Schwartz, 2003)

- **The Human Spirit Energy: Energy of Meaning and Purpose**

People tap into the energy of the human spirit when their everyday work and activities are consistent with what they value most and with what gives them a sense of meaning and purpose. If the work they're doing really matters to them, they typically feel more positive energy, focus better, and demonstrate greater perseverance. Regrettably, the high demands and fast pace of corporate life don't leave much time to pay attention to these issues, and many people don't even recognize meaning and purpose as potential sources of energy. (Tony Schwartz, 2003)

3. WHAT IS COACHING?

Some coaches believe that it is about advising clients. Some believe that it involves guiding clients to find their own answers. A few claim that a coach must have expertise within the fields where is the coaching process. Spiritually focused coaches say that it is all about "connection." Life coaches with

therapy backgrounds believe that the process includes counselling or therapy. In reality, coaching can be all of the above. It depends on the needs of each client and the skills of the coach. (Curly Martin *"The Life Coaching Handbook",* 2007)

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) defines coaching as "a partnership that accelerates learning rhythm, performance and progress of the client on the personal and professional level."

European Coaching Institute (ECI) defines coaching as "a process that helps the client to give up on what is now and to achieve what he wanted to became". In this definition became clear that coaching is a powerful method of learning, transforming and re-defining the personality.

The coach has a role of catalyzing inner processes and open access to inner resources in order to create a better life and to achieve specific goals established by the client. This has happened during a number of agreed sessions aimed by the transformation goal of the client. The coaching process is a dialogue, a profound and special tip of communication, where a coach uses tools like active listening, feedback techniques, motivational techniques, reflection and questions techniques, etc.

The differences between a usual conversation and a coaching conversation are:

- Focusing on the specific topics of the client;
- Guiding processes of thinking, learning and behaviour of the client;
- Following an action plan to achieve client goals and results.

Coaching goals and objectives can be as followed:

- Improving communication with colleagues, family, partner or friends;
- Finding professional vocation;
- Developing new skills, behaviours or abilities;
- Develop healthy relationships;
- Handling fears; etc.

A coaching process uses different learning styles and guides the client on how to learn. A coach is more an expert in learning processes and psychological transformational tools. Coaching use different psychological approaches in his process that helps to personal and professional development.

A coaching process is a useful method in personal development as well as in professional development. Nowadays this concept is more elaborated then before and we can distinguish more tips of coaching according to the purpose of the targeted clients (adapted from Coaching Course, 2013):

1. *Business coaching* – the main client targets are businessman and managers and has the purpose to give support in the creation and developing a successful vision for the business or the company.
2. *Executive coaching* – it is the process where the clients - businessman or managers – work with a coach to improve their business or managerial/leadership skills. This process can be initiated by the client in particular or by the company.
3. *Corporate coaching* – it is the process where the company pay for coaching sessions for employees or teams to improve their performance in the team/working department. This session can involve many employees and sometimes many departments too.
4. *Career coaching* – it is a process initiated usually by a client who intends to improve a specific area from his career, to clarify a career path and the steps to achieve clients career goals.
5. *Life coaching* – it is a process initiated by a client who intends to improve a specific area from his life, to find some specific solution for life or relational problems.

The life coach uses the power of commitment to enable their clients to achieve beneficial and measurable results in all areas of their lives. Life coaching is a holistic process that has the power to balance and harmonize life. (Curly Martin *"The Life Coaching Handbook",* 2007)

Coaching on the spot is a supportive conversation rather than a 'telling' one, considers Jackie Arnold *("Coaching Skills for leaders in the workplace. How to develop, motivate and get the best from your staff"*, 2009). It involves using some of the skills of coaching that all good managers already know:

- Listening without judgement.
- Staying with the person while they explain their needs.
- Giving eye contact and full attention to the situation.
- Allowing your questions to draw out the knowledge from the client.
- Supporting them to come to a decision.
- Tapping into their own knowledge and skills.

Coaching does not always need a formal structure to be effective. It does, however, need trust, patience, skilled questions, sensitivity and the ability to create a close rapport with clients. Above all, it requires to believe that client knows the answer. It requires to put aside the need to 'fix it' for them: to allow them to own the task or find the solution that is best for them.

The most important thing in coaching is the type of relationship that grows between the coach and his client. The coaching process involves a partnership between the coach and the client with the common goal to find a solution to the clients' problems. The main role of the coach is to enable and empower the client. This is achieved using the "power of commitment" as leverage.

Once clients agree to an activity, they are committed to do it. This commitment is powerfully linked to the client's identity. The coach just taps into this power and follow client way of doing. As a metaphor, we can see the coach as the person who carries the light for the client and lighting his way. Only the client decides if he takes a way or another, if he approaches a specific problem or goes further to another goal.

4. COACHING PROCESS IN HANDLING STRESS

The main aims and guidelines for coaching are the following:

1. *Awareness* – the essence of quality coaching is reaching awareness and responsibility. We are able to control and change only those things we are aware of and we are controlled by the things we are not aware of. Awareness gives us the power to control our reality.
2. *Responsibility for our lives* – a coach facilitates the client to take responsibility on his decision processes and to anticipate and accept the consequences of these decisions. When we take a decision we became responsible for our lives and in control of it.
3. *Self-esteem* – trust in our abilities and strength. To build trust is necessary to take responsibility for our actions and to learn from consequences. Only by acting we can find our abilities and strength and have a realistic image of ourselves. It is important to build self-esteem based on reality.

To realize all this, a coach does not teach the client the best way to do things, he only facilitates learning by creating a proper environment. The decisions and steps a client is going to take are his own, as well as the gains and consequences. A coach empowers the client for learning and transformation and the client itself decide what he want to learn and what changes are important in his life. Freedom of decision is totally respected. In the coaching process, the coach help client to think, anticipate and draw possible consequences of his decision and take responsibility for them before acting.

The role of the coach is as follows:

- Listen, observe and adapt his approach to every specific client.
- Give support for developing abilities, identifying resources and expressing creativity and authenticity.

- Help the client to develop necessary competency for reaching objectives (attitude, behaviours, ideas, motivations, interests, talents, etc.)
- Challenge the client and guide him to choose the best actions necessary to perform.
- Accompany the client in taking decisions and choosing the right solutions.
- Offer a different perspective on the client reality by honest and constructive feedback.

More and more persons are looking now for professional help when they are confronted with high stress and burn out in their lives. A coach can help them in many ways regarding these issues of life. As I said before, there are many strategies to cope with stress. The differences are made by the client situation and by his available resources.

To follow the steps of the coaching process, first of all, is important to map the actual situation of the client. This is called - in professional terms - **identifying the problem and the cause/root** of it. Clients came for help when they face many kinds of difficulties, so its important to find out if the problem is really about stress. Then to find out what **symptoms** are already manifesting in the client's life. After this, the client will decide the objectives he wishes to attain, and only after all this anamnesis the interventions and changes are going to be considered.

According to specificity of the case we can start with changes at the level of actions, emotions or acceptance of the situation. Usually, if the person is extremely exhausted and has symptoms at the health level, it is better to start with acceptance approaches.

Acceptance-oriented approaches, as I said before, have in the centre of attention to restore a normal level of health, or as Tony Schwartz shows in his approach, to restore body energy.

The principal actions at this level are: quality of sleep, good nutrition & sport, renew energy levels within the day, social support, building resilience. At this point, the role of the coach is to accompany his client to decide to visit a doctor or to get a professional plan of diet and fitness. The purpose here is to recharge the energy of the body, so we can also talk about renewal breaks, waking in nature and meditation. Together with the coach the client makes a plan to became healthier and, of course, during this process, many other specialists are involved.

Building resilience is also important. Clients come with the feeling that they are not the same as before and have no chance to be healthy anymore, or with the idea that they will lose their minds in a stressful situation. Now is time for the client to find out that there is not a unique way of facing the stress and there are solutions for going out of these situations. It is important to accept and take responsibility for the situation and to reconnect with people from his social group and spend quality time together.

High level of stress puts a person in "fight-or-flight" mode which means losing control of emotion. After the client gains more body energy and is feeling more vital, it is time for **emotion-oriented approaches**. Here coach can use reframing techniques to help the client to see all the perspective of the situation and to have a holistic view. In this way, he can identify the previews decision that brings him in a stressful situation and the changing points. He can make a representative mind map of the situation and see the problem more detached.

Another useful approach is using EFT techniques for releasing emotional tension. Emotional freedom technique (EFT) is an alternative treatment for physical pain and emotional distress. It's also referred to as tapping or psychological acupressure. Though still being researched, EFT tapping has been used to treat people with anxiety and people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Similar to acupuncture, EFT focuses on the meridian points — or energy hot spots — to restore balance to your body's energy. It's believed that restoring this energy balance can relieve symptoms of a negative emotional experience that may have caused the unbalanced state.

For releasing emotional tension, Milton Model techniques are helpful and work with metaphors. The word "metaphor" incorporates long or short stories, allegories, parables, similes, poems, jokes and quotes. Clients already use metaphors to describe the way they perceive their lives. In order to get fast results, it would be helpful to reorganize your clients' metaphor language. The coach can change their

metaphors or use alternative metaphors to give them the choice of action to help them achieve their outcomes. (Curly Martin *"The Life Coaching Handbook*", 2007)

Ones we succeed in balancing body and emotional energy, our client is ready to action Orientated Approaches. Before going to act, the client creates a changing plan guided by the coach and together they identify the necessary abilities and competences to accomplish. Now the client can use abilities already well known and helpful and recognize what kind of new abilities he is going to learn.

With these techniques, we can restore the mental energy as well as the human spirit energy. On the process of planning a new way of living and working, the client will redefine his purpose and usually give new meanings of his life. A high episode of stress is a life crisis and this experience determine many people to start important changing in their lives. That implies new purposes and new meanings. Some of them change jobs, others explore some talents or help others in the same situations as they. Others restructure their relationships, change partners or find a partner. It's important that the client finds a way he is happy with.

Next step in this approach is to add some new abilities according to the purpose and the plan they make. Learning new skills can be a different process itself. Client starts to rule his plan and at some points, he adds new learning experience and abilities as communication and assertiveness, set healthy boundaries, time management, build healthy relationships, emotional intelligence skills, energy management, etc.

During the process, the client reports success in achieving his plan, takes some more responsibilities over his life and gains a high level of self-esteem. No doubts that he is now more aware of the past experience, can anticipate and approach better stressful situations. That is a new step made in the long way of human maturity and hope that makes us wiser and temperate in our lives.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Stressful situations are much common in an adult life that we even realize. Some adults pass through it by themselves or with the help of social support, some others suffer damaging impact in health and quality of life. I believe that we should, as a society, take responsibility regarding this phenomenon and came with a solution accessible to everyone. It is a good way to prevent illness, delinquency, turnover, domestic violence and conflicts. Teaching people to approach stress raises the level of awareness and responsibility.

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