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Developing as a coach

Adding to the data – feelings

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Purpose

This exercise helps the coach to use their own body to gather additional data.

Description

You may have clients who are very good at articulating their problems and issues, who make judgements and rationalize as they talk. You might describe them as being in their head. It is easy to get hooked in to the description and for a while stop being aware of how we are feeling inside – a useful source of additional data.

In this exercise you practise first with a trusted colleague while you develop your awareness of your feelings rather than your thoughts. Choose someone who would also like to develop their ability to hone their own feeling skills; then you can both benefit. You will not be coaching them on any issue and it is important to be clear about this at the start.

Process

It is recommended that you read all the instructions before starting on the process. Find a topic that one of you is going to talk about. Ideally it will be a topic that is playing on their mind a little; however, it should not be anything too overwhelming. It also needs to be something that can be talked about for 10 minutes.

Let's say that your colleague is going to do the talking. Sit down with your chairs next to each other rather than facing. This may feel a bit odd but you do not want to see the person as they speak. The person starts to talk about their topic and all you do is listen. Try and avoid looking at them. As they are talking, notice if there are any sensations in your body and track whether these sensations change during the telling of the story. After 10 minutes, stop and share what you felt and how it changed. Try and stick with a physical description and not an interpretation. So, 'I had a sensation in my upper chest that was restricting' rather than 'I felt anxious when you talked about . . .', or 'You must be anxious'.

It is interesting how often our own sensations are those also described by the other person. The more often you do this exercise the more able you will become to notice your own feelings and to become curious if you pick up any that are unfamiliar.

In phase two of the exercise you start in the same way but then stop the person as you become aware of a feeling. Be tactful and sensitive as you are just testing something out. For example, 'I've just noticed my shoulders are really tight'. The other person may or may not find that they have the same experience. Then continue and interrupt again if something else changes. It is important that you are both aware that this is a practice exercise designed to develop your own awareness as a coach.

In a coaching situation, always include an element of curiosity in your questioning as what you are feeling may not be relevant to them. You might say something like 'I am noticing it's a little hard to catch my breath. I wonder if you are feeling the same?'. If the client says no then move on. All you are doing is offering the possibility and I find these interventions often create a new awareness in the client. Once you develop your own awareness more fully you can use this as a way of helping a coaching client to develop their own ability to notice feelings as they arise.

Pitfalls

You need to ensure that you have a clear contract to deal with a situation where the client becomes distressed, should this arise. The exercise can evoke powerful feelings in both of you; however if set up as an experiment for you both, the learning and benefits to your practice are great.

Bibliography

Joyce, P. and Sills, C. (2001) *Skills in Gestalt Counselling and Psychotherapy*, London: Sage Publications.