Compassion-focused imagery for use within compassion focused coaching.

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Introduction

Often coachees can be self-critical of their performance at work or on the sports field. However, in some cases self-criticism can be undermining and even though the coachee may perform well, it’s never quite good enough from their perspective. Yet their employers and colleagues may be satisfied of their performance. This self-criticism can become an additional burden although it can be addressed in compassion-focused coaching.

Research has been undertaken into the use of compassionate images with self-critical people in order to help them to develop self-compassion (eg Gilbert & Irons, 2005; Rockcliff et al., 2008). Calming and self-soothing imagery exercises can reduce the sympathetic nervous system activity and enhance the activity of the parasympathetic nervous system. In 2008, Rockcliff and associates undertook a pilot exploration of heart rate variability and salivary cortisol responses to compassion-focused imagery. Interestingly they found that compassion-focused imagery can attenuate hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis activity in some individuals whereas highly critical individuals may require additional therapeutic work in order to benefit from compassion-focused imagery.

The steps are shown below to help coachees develop compassionate focused imagery (adapted Rockcliff et al., 2008:133-134)

1. Coachee asked to visualise compassion for them coming from an external source such as another person (or non-human). (Image to make them feel that they were the recipient)
2. Coach to prompt coachee every 60 seconds with a statement to remind them of the process eg: ‘Allow yourself to feel that you are the recipient of great compassion’

Discussion

Compassion-focused imagery is particularly useful for coachees (and coaches) who are self-critical. However, some highly self-critical coachees need regular practice of this technique as they may be reluctant to let go of their habitual self-criticism for a variety of reasons such as they believe that they are letting their standards slip or they do not deserve compassion (see Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Rockcliff et al., 2008). They may even perceive compassionate focused imagery as threatening. In these cases therapy may be more suitable than coaching if it is an issue they wish to address.

References


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Biography

Professor Stephen Palmer PhD is Director of the Centre for Coaching and the Coaching Psychology Unit, City University, London, UK. He is an APECS Accredited Executive Coach Supervisor and a MSCP Accredited Coaching Psychologist. He is Co-editor of the Handbook of Coaching Psychology (with Whybrow). He is Hon President of the Society for Coaching Psychology.