

How to Coach with Positive Psychology and Emotional Intelligence

Julia Stewart

A few weeks ago, a coaching student asked me to talk about emotional intelligence during a course on positive psychology. It was a great request, because both these sciences help people function more resourcefully for greater satisfaction in life, but they are far from identical.

So what's the difference?

Well, to understand any field of research, first look to the questions being asked by the researchers, because, like coaches, scientific researchers know that we create our reality with questions. Positive psychology and emotional intelligence are distinct fields, so researchers explore them with different questions. Here are some of the questions asked by researchers:

Positive Psychology

- What do people who are happy, healthy and successful do differently that can be instructive to the rest of us?
- How do some people grow through adversity?
- What attitudes and feelings, such as gratitude, positivity and curiosity, are associated with greater success?

Emotional Intelligence

- How can people perceive, distinguish and understand emotions in themselves?
- How can people learn to recognize emotions in others?
- How can people manage their emotions and relationships more successfully?

As you can see, both sciences seek to help people become more effective in life, but they look at that through slightly different lenses.

Positive psychology explores what helps people lead happier, more successful lives and become their own best selves. That makes it highly compatible with coaching.

Emotional intelligence focuses on identifying, understanding and using emotions resourcefully. Hmm ... that makes it pretty compatible with coaching, as well! Emotional intelligence researchers study how people can perceive, distinguish and understand all emotions—both positive and negative—in themselves and others.

Although coaches work primarily with positive attitudes and feelings, we need exceptional emotional intelligence to coach our clients and sometimes our clients need us to teach

emotional intelligence to them, so they can navigate their feelings and relationships, while working toward success and greater happiness.

Both positive psychology and emotional intelligence can enhance your coaching. Just as important, studying positive psychology and emotional intelligence can help you understand what really works and what does not.

Here's an example of using positive psychology within a coaching session to enhance emotional intelligence in the client and help her get what she wants:

Let's say your client comes to her coaching session in a panic. She's just learned that her company is downsizing, most members of her department will be laid off and she may lose her job. She's in the midst of what Daniel Goleman, the author of *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More Than IQ* (10th anniversary ed., Bantam Books, 2005), has called "Amygdala Hijack."

The amygdala is the "alarm bell" of the brain and is triggered by threats and stress, which can cause it to grow and become dominant, leading to classic "pasterizing, futurizing, and catastrophizing" thoughts. Essentially your client is in the midst of the "fight or flight" response, which can pose a challenge to you as her coach, if you're not skilled.

Fortunately, you can use positive psychology interventions to calm your client now so she can think more resourcefully, and she can use some of these tools over time to help shrink her amygdala and develop a "positivity bias" that will help her become more resilient and successful.

Start by listening empathically and mindfully. You might suggest your client take a deep breath with you to get a bit more centered. Ask her about a time when she's been in a similar situation and did well. What strengths did she apply to that situation? How could she apply those strengths now? What's the outcome she most wants, as opposed to the problems she wants to avoid?

Help her design a plan of action and include exercises that have been shown to reduce negativity and increase well-being, such as writing in a daily journal or sharing concerns with a trusted friend the next time she feels panicked. This way, you help her become aware of her feelings and create a new reality according to what she wants, so she's likely to weather the current situation well, get the outcome she wants and increase her resiliency in order to meet future challenges successfully.

In other words, use new questions to help her create a brand-new reality.

Julia Stewart, MCC, is a coach, coach trainer and seminar leader who uses her creativity and humor to help people work brilliantly and step into their greatness. She's currently working on a PhD on the Science and Philosophy of Coaching. Julia founded School of Coaching Mastery in 2007, where she teaches advanced coaching skills, positive psychology and other science-based coaching courses, which lead to the Certified Positive Psychology Coach credential.

This article was originally posted on the [International Coach Federation Blog](#).