

The Neuroscience of Coaching and Stress

Ann Betz

Stress is, if not one of the main reasons people come to coaching, certainly is something that comes up with almost every client. I once heard the amazing (and now deceased) Dr. Paul Pearsall speak at an ICF Conference about having a balanced, healthy unstressed heart. His conclusion—it is perhaps impossible in today's world unless you live on a remote South Sea island.

In neuroscience, we use the term “emotional regulation” for what is basically the ability to deal with stress. And as I read through the literature, it dawned on me that this is a huge amount of what we do with our clients. We help them not only “emotionally regulate” in the moment of our conversation, but we also help them build skills for more competency in this area. In other words, we help them become more resilient and capable in the face of day to day life.

So let me walk you through what current neuroscience research has found are the effective tools for dealing with stress, and how we most typically do this through coaching. In order of effectiveness (from lowest to highest), we have:

1. **Controlling the environment so as not to encounter stressor.** Interestingly, this may sound bad at first, but it is actually quite effective if you can do it. And we help our clients do this all the time. For example, we might explore options with them to get rid of a 60-minute commute. Or help them see they can make boundaries with an in-law. As coaches, many of us (myself included) have designed our lives for a more peaceful experience. I dislike office environments with fluorescent lights and people asking me for things all day long. So I am a coach and trainer, I often work at home in my pajamas while hanging out with my cats, voila, stressor controlled. The reason I have this near the bottom of the list when it actually works so well (and some scientists argue is actually the most effective strategy) is that relying on control is probably a losing proposition. We simply can't (and shouldn't try) to control everything and everyone so as not to bug us. And the feeling of needing to be in control when you can't be actually causes more stress. Still, it works great when you can do it.
2. **Naming the emotion.** As coaches, this is often how we start when someone is dealing with an emotional challenge—we ask, “What's going on?” We reflect what we are hearing, often teasing out deeper understanding for the client. The challenge of this strategy (as anyone who has worked with human beings for any length of time knows) is that people often don't know what they are feeling. As coaches, we help them understand and name through metaphor, by using our own intuition, through body sensations, and basically, any tool we have. Over time, we help people develop competence in this area so that they have more words and understanding of the vague sensations within.
3. **Reframing—finding an empowering way to look at the issue.** The act of reframing (also known as taking a new perspective) invites our powerful thinking brain to the party, which calms down our limbic system (aka “stress”) responses. In other words, reframing enables our clients to actually think and not react. Being asked to try on a new perspective is like stopping a runaway train. It gets us out of the limbic system, which got activated by stress, and into the pre-

frontal cortex. And when we can think about things using our higher, more developed mind, we do pretty well.

4. ***Mindfulness—meditation, being present to body sensations, focusing on gratitude/love.*** *The number one, hands down, most effective solution to any neuroscience challenge. Stress, creativity, improving memory, being more emotionally intelligent—being mindful has been proven again and again to make a huge difference in all these areas.*

As coaches, I believe we absolutely help our clients become more “mindful.” Even just a good coaching conversation brings people present into the moment and makes them pay attention to what is going on, rather than putting their attention on regrets from the past or worries about the future. In many schools they call this “process coaching,” where we take our clients deep into what they are experiencing, right here, right now. It can be almost like a guided meditation in dialogue, as we walk with them through a metaphor, or help them put their body sensations into words. It’s powerful, and can release old patterns and issues that have been stuck for years, simply by helping people be present.

Trust me on this one: If you do ONE THING for your client’s brains—and your own—help them find a way to spend time being **present**. This calms and strengthens and develops the parts of the brain we need the most. Fun brain fact: Einstein’s brain? Not bigger than yours or mine, but bigger in areas that are shown to increase through meditation.

Om.

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