

Wellness and the Coach

Christopher Paterson

You choose to coach because you want to help other people. However, many coaches are better at supporting their clients than they are at helping themselves. Unless you're at your best, you can't support your clients effectively. Therefore, understanding the cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects of your own wellness is fundamental in order to be a successful and sustainable support to your clients.

Research conducted by ALCHEMY Career Management in 2014 demonstrated that, by making small changes based on the four recommendations outlined on the next page, people were able to reduce stress by eight percent, decrease workload pressure by 16 percent and increase their focus and concentration in six weeks.

Time to Be Selfish

Think of the safety demonstration on an aircraft. In case of an emergency, we're instructed to secure our own oxygen mask before assisting the person next to us. While this may seem selfish at first, the logic is undeniable: We need to make sure that we get sufficient oxygen so that we can be of assistance to others. Failure to do so puts us at risk and renders us of little use to those around us.

The same can be said for the role and responsibility of a coach. Unless you look after yourself and get that oxygen, you're no good to your clients. Once you are ready to be selfish, you are one step closer to making the kind of sustained behavior change that is required to be at your very best and consistently add value to your clients.

Research points to two disciplines that combine to facilitate your wellness profile: neurological wellness (i.e., your cognitive and emotional wellness) and behavioral wellness.

The Neurology of Wellness

The latest advancements in neuroplasticity and neuro-leadership have shown us that it is possible to shift your cognitive capacity and thought patterns in order to build resilience, increase your focus and be at your best.

Let's begin by looking at the battle between the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and the limbic system. Your PFC sits in your brain's frontal lobe and is responsible for complex reasoning, such as

problem solving, memory, learning and decision-making. These are all critical functions for coaches.

Your limbic system is the complex web of structures right in the middle of the brain across both hemispheres. The limbic system is the center of your emotional responses. When this powerful structure is activated (e.g., when you're stressed, frustrated or anxious), it gets very loud, very quickly. This absorbs all your cognitive energy and leaves next to nothing for the poor old PFC. As a result, decision-making and situational awareness are significantly compromised. These are often the times when we say something that we shouldn't or misunderstand what is happening around us. Think of that angry email or text message sent in the heat of the moment. If we want to be at our best, we need to make sure that we're giving the PFC the clear air and breathing space that it needs to operate at a consistently high level.

You can take the following four steps on a daily basis to achieve this. These facilitate your own wellness, but you can share them with clients to support them, as well.

1. Do the hard things first. Your PFC tires easily throughout the day, so if you have an important, complex or difficult task on your agenda, attempt to complete it early when you are well-rested with a fully functioning PFC. This is particularly true when you're having challenging conversations and making complex decisions. It's also why the old recommendation to "sleep on it" remains relevant.

2. Focus on one thing at a time. Multitasking is a sure way to scramble your PFC, but it's also how most of us manage our days. The human brain works best when it's dedicated to a single task with laser-beam focus. You can't achieve this when the phone is constantly ringing, you're distracted by social media and you have one eye on your inbox. To unlock your cognitive potential, allocate sufficient time and space to important tasks, get out of the traffic and see how much sharper your thinking becomes.

3. Manage your limbic threats. Regardless of personality, experience or capability, everyone encounters events and stimuli that activate their limbic system every day. Learning to identify these triggers and manage them effectively allows you to take back control, make considered judgements and avoid emotional decision-making. [David Rock's SCARF model](#) helps us identify the five most common limbic threats and ways to manage them.

4. Run on six cylinders. Individuals who make poor lifestyle choices are not as mentally focused and have lower self-confidence, lower energy levels and lower overall life and work fulfillment.

In 2009, my colleagues and I took a closer look at the variables at play here and cross-checked our observations with the available empirical evidence. As a result, we were able to isolate six key areas that facilitate wellness. We call these the [six cylinders of wellness](#) and the evidence shows a causal link between these behaviors and wellness outcomes including stress levels, mental alertness, energy, self-esteem, memory, sex drive, life fulfilment, focus, concentration and overall levels of happiness.

These six cylinders include nutrition, activity, sleep, time out, social connections and our outlets. Making good decisions across these six cylinders helps all of us to be at our very best, particularly when dealing with change, stress and inevitable life challenges.

Small Steps

As with all behavior change, this is not about making wholesale changes to your life. Small, easy-to-maintain changes facilitate sustained change over the long term. As such, you should start with the elements that make the most sense to you right now.

This article was originally published in [Coaching World](#).

Christopher Paterson is the Managing Director of ALCHEMY Career Management, an Australian firm that supports individuals through career transitions, assists companies adapting to organizational change and delivers wellness programs within organizations.

Proposed Tags: featured, wellness, International Coach Federation, ICF, David Rock, SCARF model, neuroscience