

“I feel you!”—The Role of Emotions in Coaching

Robert Biswas-Diener

Recently, I overheard someone say, “Every time you feel a negative emotion, it is a little trauma that your body stores and carries with you for life.” This comment was interesting to me because it is evidence of two distinct, but related phenomena.

First, it offers proof that people hold strong opinions about emotions. Unlike topics in other professional fields, psychological concepts are the domain of the masses. You don’t hear people chatting about their pet theories of light refraction, the formation of galaxies or the tensile strength of polymers. People do, however, offer opinions about all things psychological. They weigh in on relationships, behavior, stress, rumination and—yes—feelings.

Second, this statement illustrates one example—albeit an extreme one—of the way that many people harbor explicit prejudices against so-called negative emotions. Historically, there has long been a prejudice against emotions in general. They have been seen as misguided, illogical and—gasp—feminine. In modern times, this prejudice has emerged especially around negative emotions. Complaints, frustration, sadness and similar feelings are occasionally seen as a failure to uphold cultural dictates for happiness.

These two points are important because both of them are centrally concerned with coaching. Regardless of where a coach is trained or the specific coaching model he or she uses, all coaches deal with feelings every time they interact with their clients. Emotions influence what clients remember, how optimistic they are concerning their own goals, and the degree to which they feel ready to take action, among other things. Similarly, coach and client beliefs about feelings inform the direction of coaching sessions and the overall arc of the coaching relationship.

To illustrate these points, let’s take the example of a single emotion: anger. Anger is the Severus Snape of feelings. Like the apparent villain in the *Harry Potter* novels, it is dark and brooding but largely misunderstood. It turns out people’s beliefs about the nature of anger influence how they experience and express it. Many people have a standoff-ish relationship with anger because they believe:

- 1) It will directly cause harm through actions such as harsh words or violence
- 2) It will overpower a person and lead them to act in ways in which they might normally be inhibited
- 3) It will cause people to get stuck—experiencing anger for long periods of time
- 4) It is painful and unpleasant
- 5) It has a negative impact on health

I do not fault anyone for harboring these types of beliefs. It is possible to find evidence for any of them through anecdotal experience or on the internet. Even so, I would encourage coaches to turn to more formal research to gain insights into anger. Here is a smattering of anger related research findings that may be counterintuitive:

- Anger causes people to be more optimistic that taking action will turn out in a desirable way
- Anger conveys strength and competence to others
- Anger can motivate people to address injustice

Of course, we aren't talking about seething hatred, violence or uncontrollable rage. Most of us experience those things only very, very rarely. Instead, we are talking about run of the mill spikes in anger that make the blood boil for a half hour or so before calming right back down.

So, how might anger—and beliefs about anger—play into coaching?

One example involves those rare occasions when clients walk into sessions angry because of a recent negative interaction. Coaches have long wondered how to manage this emotional experience. They have been curious about the extent to which the anger might interfere with effective coaching.

One way coaches sometimes deal with client anger is through “clearing.” This coaching technique involves having clients experience catharsis through the quick and temporary venting of anger. The idea underpinning this technique is that people who are allowed to express their anger can “get it off their plate” and make room for more effective coaching. Unfortunately, research does not support the effectiveness of this technique. Typically, expressing emotion increases arousal and keeps people angry.

As an alternative, consider using a different, although common, coaching technique: meta-view. In this technique, clients view their own situation from a third person, fly-on-the-wall perspective. Research has shown that this can reduce feelings of aggression.

In the end, I would not advocate that anyone harbor strong prejudices against negative emotions like anger. I would not advocate a view that these natural feelings are traumas. Instead, I would look for the most effective ways to validate them, understand them and manage them.

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Robert Biswas-Diener, Ph.D., PCC is the foremost authority on positive psychology coaching. He is a leading authority on strengths, culture, courage, and happiness and best known for his pioneering work in the application of positive psychology.

Robert has consulted with a wide range of international organizations on performance management and talent development. He conducts trainings on coaching, strengths, positivity, courage and appreciative inquiry with organizations and businesses around the world and through his own coaching school, Positive Acorn. Robert has trained professionals in America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, South America and the Middle-east. He has a Doctorate in social psychology, a Master's degree in clinical psychology, and

is an ICF Credential-holder. He has published nearly fifty scholarly articles and multiple books on diverse psychological topics. Learn more about Robert and his coaching school at positiveacorn.com.