

## **Do you have what it takes to successfully manage an uncomfortable coaching conversation?**

**By Marcia Reynolds, PsyD, MCC**

When a person has a breakthrough in thinking, it is preceded by a breakdown in a mental frame or belief. This breakdown could be brief and slightly awkward or a drawn-out emotional reaction. Your own brain has an automatic defense mechanism that will spur you to try to make the person feel better or to withdraw from the conversation. Most coaches feel they need to ease their client's psychological pain. If you do this, you will hinder their ability to see new possibilities and grow.

How well you handle yourself in these moments will impact how effective your coaching will be.

**If you are slightly uncomfortable when a client shows emotion** you are not seeing the client as creative, resourceful, and whole. You are acting as if they need to be cared for and fixed. To allow the breakthrough process to unfold, some key points to consider include:

1. You must have a strong belief in the person's potential to grow and see new possibilities no matter what emotions they express; your willingness to listen deeply and explore the person's perceptions and emotions so they can move forward depends on your ability to hold a safe space for the person to fully express how they feel.
2. You need recognize when your fears or judgments appear. Then breathe and release your reactions with patience, curiosity, and courage.
3. All humans want to feel heard and understood even if this makes you feel uncomfortable. If you give the person space to move through their emotion, and then seek to discover what beliefs, fears, desires, needs, or conflict of values is prompting a reaction, you demonstrate that you believe the client can move forward no matter how they feel in the moment.
4. People want you to be present more than they need you to be perfect. Your presence, not your words, builds the trust needed for someone to feel safe enough to explore their thoughts and emotions with you. Without this, you may get incremental behavioral adjustments but not the breakthrough moments needed for long-lasting change.

**If you have a difficult time when a client expresses emotions.** Consider these tips from the book, [\*The Discomfort Zone\*](#): How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs.

1. Developing your ability to be grounded in the present moment and fully looking, hearing, and sensing what is going on around you will help you be more comfortable listening to people even when the conversation is awkward or unpleasant for you. Start with developing your mindfulness and ability to be present. I recommend the work of Eckhart Tolle and Jon Kabat-Zinn.

2. Re-examine what you feel is your purpose as a coach. Are you only focused on solving problems and successfully achieving goals? If so, you have left the human element out of the picture. Problem solving is helpful, but transformational coaching develops minds as well as perspective. Learn how to listen beyond the words to discover what is stopping your client from solving their problems on their own. This makes you a more valuable resource.
3. To be a great coach, you should never feel you can fix a person's problems. Can you remove your doubts in the person's ability to grow without your wisdom and ideas? You cannot fall into judgment or impatience if you want to turn your uncomfortable conversations into breakthrough experiences.
4. To achieve a meaningful result, you have to trust the value of the Discomfort Zone process even when you are not sure it is working. If you lose trust in the process and either back off and revert to simple problem solving or telling a person what to do, you could hurt future attempts to use the Discomfort Zone. Three pitfalls to watch out for are your own discomfort, your anxiety with the other person's discomfort, and your own impatience. Work on managing your stress. Seek out your own coach to help you develop your emotional intelligence. As a side effect, you will probably come to find more joy in your daily life.

Tips from [\*The Discomfort Zone\*](#): How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs, by Marcia Reynolds.