

How Can Ideas from the Existential Approach Enhance Coaching for People with Work-Related Stress?

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Abstract

Stress remains a significant problem in contemporary society causing people to take sick leave and early retirement. This paper explores how using ideas from the existential approach can enhance coaching for people who experience work-related stress. It reports on an action research project involving six participants in coaching over a four month period. It was designed to explore how a coach can develop and sustain an existential attitude and learn from the use of interventions derived from existential philosophy. Findings suggest that existential coaching can be a way of reducing stress by helping clients understand that openness to experience is a way of gaining insight into their need for control.

Key words: Existential coaching, stress, control, action research, coaching relationship.

Introduction

Stress and burn-out is becoming a big problem in the Western world and a recent OECD-report states that Denmark has the world's most mentally worn-out population. 50% of people who go on early retirement in Denmark, or who can only manage light jobs, do so because of mental reasons like stress, depression and burn-out (OECD, 2006; European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2009). According to Rytgaard (2011) this percentage has doubled since 1995. This report is just one example of an increasing number of articles on how stress has become a big threat to our work-life well-being and well-being in general. Stress related issues are therefore very often present in coaching settings, and it is an area with potential to be further developed by coaching professionals.

As existential counselling and therapy is aimed at helping people to get better at 'the art of living' (Deurzen, 2002, p. 19), it could be argued that this approach could be suitable for working with stress issues. The existential approach is mostly used within counselling and psychotherapy settings. However Spinelli and Horner (2008) advocate that this approach is also very suitable for coaching. As existential work deals with important questions in our lives, it is a demanding approach for both the coach and the client as it involves a lot of work and courage for the client to face up to these challenges. However, existential philosophy does not see a troubled person as ill or someone who needs to be cured, but rather as someone who needs help to make sense of life and that this is possible (Deurzen, 2002).

When coaching people with stress as a recurring problem, psychological blocks that have to do with both past and present issues and future aspirations or fears will have to be addressed. This comes potentially close to the borderline between coaching and therapy. I would therefore like to give a brief account of how I define coaching.

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In differentiating coaching from therapy, coaching is often seen as short-term, focusing on present and future (often positive) issues and restricted to “healthy” people. Therapy on the other hand is seen as long-term, focusing on the client’s past and dealing with negative and ‘unhealthy’ issues (Bachkirova, 2007; Bachkirova & Cox, 2005; Maxwell, 2009; Price, 2009; Spinelli, 2008b). However, it is acknowledged by these authors, that such a strict distinction is not realistic, and it is emphasized that distinguishing between different types of coaching is important (Bachkirova, 2007). Developmental coaches will inevitably be working with some psychological blocks in their practice. This is not necessarily problematic provided the coach learns to recognize the variety of psychological conditions ‘including those of a clinical nature’ (Maxwell, 2009, p. 160), and stays within his or her competence. Thus these authors stress the importance of a thorough knowledge of coaching psychology. Within existential coaching discussions, Spinelli (2008b) argues that the boundaries between coaching and therapy are becoming more and more “fuzzy” (p. 248). He highlights the importance of immediacy in the coaching relationship, and the use of the coaching relationship as ‘the primary instrument’ (2008b p. 247).

This paper reports on an action research project using the existential approach in order to enhance coaching for people who experience work-related stress.

Review of literature

Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional stress and coping model is still widely acknowledged and heavily drawn upon by numerous researchers (Briner et al., 2004; Cooper, 2001; Dewe & Trenberth, 2004). However, researchers do not seem to agree on whether studies conducted have actually been able to give answers to ‘what it is that determines how well a person copes’ (Dewe & Trenberth, 2004, p. 143). Studies are primarily conducted using the same research methods based on self-report questionnaires which do not take sufficient account of the context or the nature of the experience. There appears therefore to be a considerable gap between coping research and intervention strategies (Briner et al., 2004; Cooper, 2001; Dewe & Trenberth, 2004).

Briner et al. (2004) advocate that researchers learn from research methods used by therapists within the clinical area of work-related anxiety and depression; and Dewe & Trenberth stress that we need to develop measures that capture the nature of the experience, and to try to understand ‘the meanings individuals give to events and what it is that makes that meaning significant’ (Dewe & Trenberth, 2004 p. 145). These authors point towards the need for qualitative studies that focus on the transaction between the individual and the environment with in-depth exploration of stressful events from a holistic approach that takes into account the origin of emotions, values and beliefs as well as peoples’ future aspirations and beliefs (Arthur, 2004; Briner et al., 2004; Cooper, 2001; Dewe & Trenberth, 2004; Folkman, 2008; Lazarus 1999). Furthermore, in her reversed version of the stress and coping model, Folkman (2008) underlines the importance of acknowledging the stressful element of giving up on previously valued goals and the fact that these are sometimes tied to fundamental beliefs.

Despite the call for qualitative studies, very little research has been published demonstrating the link between psychotherapy or counselling and reduction of work-related stress. Jenkins and Palmer (2003) report a single case study of the effect of a multimodal approach based on a REBT model that proves to have had significant effect. In the domain of coaching Palmer and Gyllensten (2005) have carried out a three-part quantitative and qualitative research study into whether coaching can reduce workplace stress. Strain (depression, anxiety and stress) was measured before and after coaching and it was found that coaching did not significantly reduce stress (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005, 2006). However the participants reported in part II, the qualitative part of the study, that cognitive coaching had reduced stress. According to Gyllensten and Palmer (2005) only a limited amount of research in relation to coaching and stress has been published.

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Later studies describe in a single study approach of Cognitive Behavioural, Rational Emotive Behavioural or Multimodal Coaching how psychological coaching can enhance performance and prevent work-related stress (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2008). In 2009, Grant et al. (2009) conducted a randomised controlled study on the benefit of cognitive-behavioural and solution focused coaching. This study showed a significant increase in goal attainment and resilience, but it had an unclear result for depression, anxiety and stress. The correlation between anxiety, depression and stress, however, showed to be extremely high.

Within the existential tradition, the work of therapists is often described in case stories. From the American existential-humanistic approach May defines anxiety as ‘the apprehension cued off by a threat to some value that the individual holds essential to his existence as a personality’ (1977, p. 205), and he states that ‘anxiety is how we handle stress’ (p. 113). May sees conflict that causes anxiety as a conflict between the present reality and our expectations. Another American existentialist, Yalom (1980) demonstrates how to work with clients on the basis of four ultimate human concerns: death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness.

From the British School of Existential Analysis, Van Deurzen, Spinelli, Cooper and Cohn are dominant voices. The works of van Deurzen (e.g. 2002, 2010, 2011) and Spinelli (1997) are rich on empirical examples and case stories. Deurzen’s approach is ‘primarily concerned with helping clients face up to the challenges of everyday life’ (Cooper, 2003, p. 109) through exploring four dimensions of existence: the physical, social, personal and spiritual world and the paradoxes that emerge from this (Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005). Spinelli’s approach (e.g. 2005; 2007) is based on an existential-phenomenological stance of un-knowing together with exploring the client’s worldview of meaning and meaninglessness and its influence on the experience of existential tensions.

Spinelli thus brings the existential approach into a coaching setting. He states that ‘Were it not for the client’s experience of conflict, there would likely be no coaching’ (2008a). He separates the concept of conflict into dissonant and consonant types (2010, 2008a, 2008b), depending on whether or not there is a fit between ‘meaning-derived stances’ and the lived experience (2008a, p. 124). However, Spinelli stresses that coaching is not necessarily about solving conflicts but rather the task of the coach should be to ‘assist the client in focusing upon, and connecting more adequately, the perceived sources of conflict with the meanings that shape and define it’ (Spinelli, 2008a, p. 127).

Existential philosophy is concerned with understanding what it means to exist. It is based on a number of assumptions about the conditions governing life. Existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Buber, Jasper, Tillich, Heidegger and Sartre make up quite a diversity within existential thinking, but there are “family resemblances” that these philosophers share (Cooper, 2003, p. 8). The most fundamental of these is that existence comes before essence, meaning that ‘*that* we are is more basic than *what* we are’ (Deurzen & Adams 2011, p. 9). According to this stance we are not something fixed but are always on the way to becoming. Subsequently, because we are not an ‘essence’ we are choosing how to respond and how to be according to our subjective interpretation of ourselves, and the relations we are in. However this awareness of our own responsibility in life is anxiety provoking because we cannot know for sure that we choose right. The fact that we also choose not to be and not to do will inevitably bring about existential guilt about what we could have become. Inauthentic living thus means self-deception through denial of the freedom and responsibility of our choices (Cooper, 2003). According to existential ideas, there are certain conditions of existence or “givens” that constitute insolvable dilemmas that we have to live with. Truth is not just a matter of subjective evaluation. It must be found within an evaluation of ‘subjective, objective and existential factors’ (Deurzen & Adams, 2011, p. 155). The aim of existential work, according to Deurzen, is ‘to help people to get better at facing up to difficulties with courage instead of running away from them’ (2011, p. 1).

Methodology

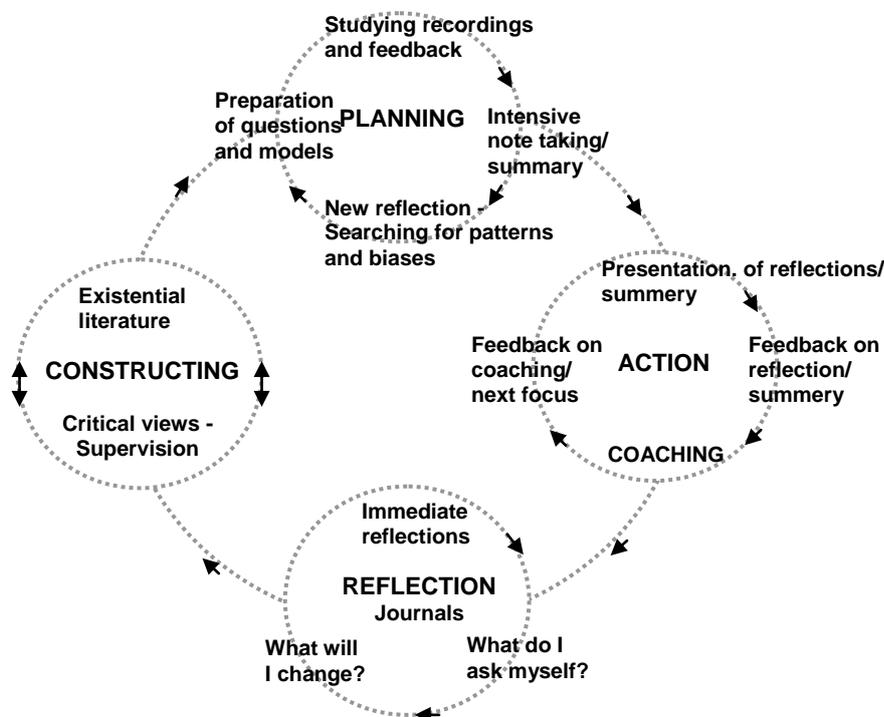
The research question asked how ideas from the existential approach could enhance coaching people with work-related stress. To answer this question the study had two aims; first to study how a coach could develop and sustain an existential attitude and learn from the use of interventions derived from existential philosophy - to follow the learning and reflection processes; and second to explore whether the coaching outcomes of the participants' experience manifested in reduced level of stress and/or enhanced well-being.

The research approach taken was qualitative (Creswell, 2007) within an interpretivist paradigm. It was conducted as action research that was concerned with the ability to work with others on a mutual and interdependent learning practice (Bradbury & Reason, 2003; Coghlan & Brannick, 2010; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2008, 2001). Coghlan & Brannick's (2010) model was followed, but also Rowan's (2001) humanistic approach to action research formed the basis of the study.

Six participants were recruited for a coaching program of eight coaching sessions each over a period of four months. The sessions of approximately 1½ hours took place every two weeks and were arranged to take place at the participant's workplace. All sessions were audio recorded.

Figure 1 shows the learning cycle of constructing, planning, action and reflecting/evaluating action (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010) that was followed throughout study. The cycle was followed on a general level through three different phases as well as on the individual level for every participant for every session (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: The Learning Cycle

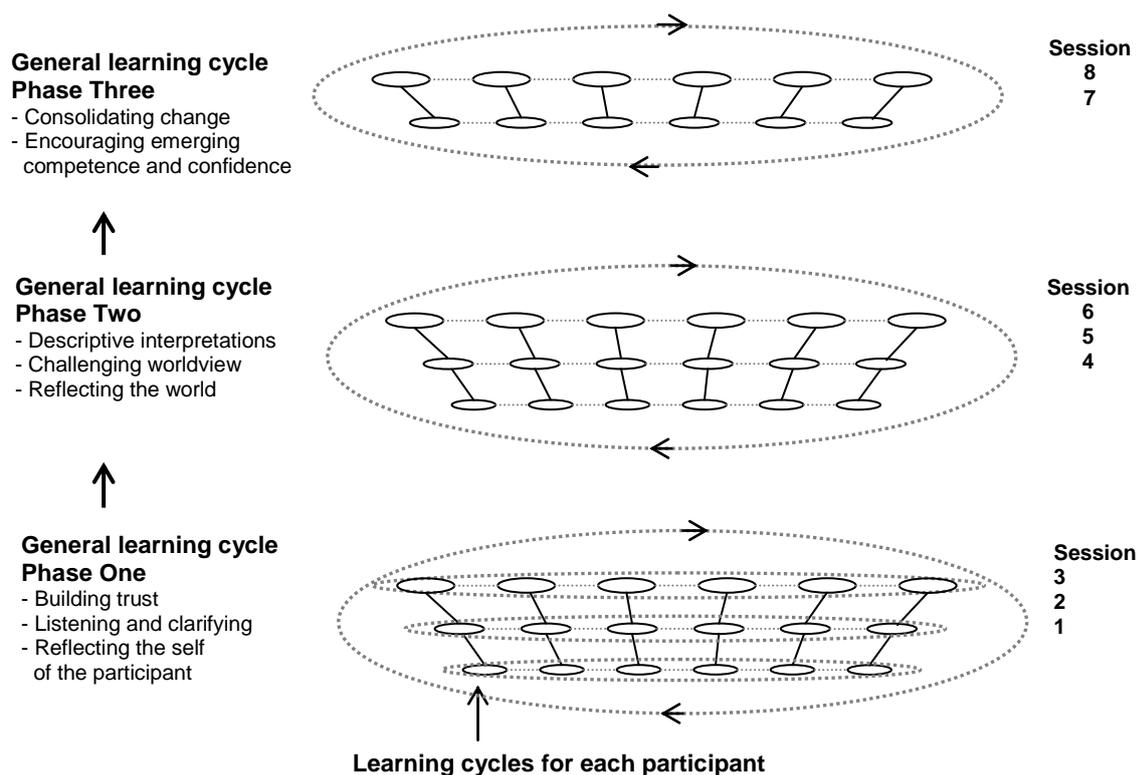


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The learning cycle was constructed in order to secure reflexivity and to work with my own biases as a constant interplay between theory, action, feedback and reflection:

- ‘Constructing’ was the preparation of myself on a theoretical level, by studying literature and discussing themes with my supervisor.
- ‘Planning’ was the very deep and specific work of listening to the audio recordings of the coaching sessions, note taking and making summaries of the previous sessions together with the reflection on patterns and biases. In addition it involved preparing questions and models for the next session.
- ‘Action’ describes my meetings with the participants. First they told me about their experience of the last session. What had made an impression and what, if anything, they had taken with them. Then I presented my summary and some of my reflections in order for them to tell me if I had understood them right, and to give me their feedback. Next would be the actual coaching and finally some immediate feedback on the coaching and discussion of focus for the next session.
- During ‘Reflection’ I worked through my experience of the coaching session – how I experienced myself, the participant, our relationship and themes that emerged during the session. My guidelines were ‘what do I ask myself?’ and ‘what would I change?’ After this a new cycle would start.

Figure 2: Project phases and overview of learning cycles



A three phase coaching model based on existential practice and coaching was used (Deurzen & Martin, 2011; Spinelli, 2007). The purpose of phase one was building trust and taking a phenomenological approach to exploring and understanding the participant’s experience of being

under stress and that way reflecting the self of the participant. This quite structured approach enabled me to carry out three subsidiary learning cycles in session one, two and three:

1. Listening to the participants opening stories and experience of being under stress;
2. Listening for beliefs and values about themselves and others;
3. Listening for existential tensions and beginning to clarify these.

The purpose of phase two (session 4-6) was to make descriptive interpretations; to verify and search for an accurate description of the participant's experience and bring it to light in a new way without distorting it. But the purpose was also to bring ambiguity and to light and pointing out paradoxes, or how patterns were repeated. This was a change in coach position to reflect the outside world. From this point on, the work with the participants got very individual but I could still follow and learn from themes that emerged during the sessions for me or the participants. This is pictured in Figure 2 by the dotted lines between the learning cycles in session four to six.

Phase Three, the last two sessions, aimed at ending the coaching relationship by supporting and encouraging change, and helping the participant to recognize the change that had actually happened.

Selection of research participants

Because existential work is aimed at life questions and existential tensions I wished to select participants who had experienced stress as a recurring problem to a degree that it affected their well-being. In addition, I wanted to avoid severe cases of chronic stress that is sometimes followed by depression as this would not be within my competence.

All six participants were recruited through my professional network. I contacted a number of CEOs and HR Managers and described the research design. Then I asked if they had any employees in their organisation whom they thought fitted the in- and exclusion-criteria and who they thought might be interested in participating. They came up with a number of possible participants whose situation they described to me in terms of level of stress and general well-being. From these descriptions I had an opportunity to invite six people to an information meeting. The CEO or HR-Manager made the first contact to find out if the candidates were interested in having a talk with me about participating. All six expressed their interest and I therefore contacted them for the mutual information meeting of approximately one hour. During that meeting I underlined that participation was completely voluntarily and described the study and how we were going to work in the coaching. The participants also described their current situation to me. They all signed the consent form. Jane, Peter, Søren, Claus and Susanne are not the participants' real names.

Data collection

Data was collected in three different ways. The biggest source of data came from the audio recordings of the sessions which amounted to a total of approximately 70 hours of coaching. I therefore decided to make summaries of all the sessions rather than transcribe each coaching session. The second source of data was feedback from the participants. After every session they filled in a feedback form and email it back to me before the next session. There were three different forms:

- 1) a general form after every session containing open questions about their experience of themselves and me during the session.
- 2) a half way feedback form concerning any changes in what they had noticed about themselves.
- 3) a final feedback form which was more extensive than the half way feedback form.

As it was difficult to obtain detailed feedback from the participants, all the coaching sessions began with a supplementary oral feedback from the previous session, and in all the sessions we made a summary with immediate feedback on the present session. This feedback was audio recorded. In addition the participants were asked to keep a personal journal for themselves, from which they took

up themes during the sessions. The third source of data was my own on-going reflections in my journals both on a general level and for the work with each participant throughout the study.

Data analysis and presentation

During the four month data collection period, data was analysed on an on-going basis in order for me to decide on the next step. Data analysis consisted of listening to the recordings, studying feedback from the participants and my own reflection processes. In this process, themes like trust and different kinds of resistance in the participants occurred as well as patterns in my own emotions and reactions. These were all subject to the data analysis. Coding which is common in qualitative analysis was not conducted because the relational aspect in social settings, which is essential to the existential approach, could have been lost in the fragmentations (Bryman, 2004).

Data, that was analysed in order to follow my learning, was presented as ‘My Journey’, and data, analysed in order to follow the benefits of the participants’ from the coaching process, was presented as “The Participants’ Journey”. Findings from “My Journey” were presented as the emerging themes in my work with the learning cycles and because of my own subjectivity and possible biases my claim for progress was verified through first-hand information. This took the form of notes from my journals, short transcripts from coaching sessions, and references to participant feedback, as respondent validation (Bryman, 2004) that have been incorporated in order to make my learning and as transparent as possible.

The “Participants’ Journeys” were presented as case stories in order to stay as close to their experience as possible and thus giving the reader the opportunity to get their own impression of the coaching process and the benefit for the participants. Presenting the participants’ journeys as case stories would also present the existential perspectives of the participants and how these have influenced on their experience of being under stress. The stories were described under the themes: “Experience of conflict and dilemma”, “Experience of consequence”, “The coaching process” and “Key helping elements”.

My Journey

This section gives examples of my major learning themes in Phase one, two and three that I obtained from following the learning cycles. In Phase One the phenomenological model of exploring and investigating the participants’ experience of being under stress was challenging for me because I had to stay within the stance of “un-knowing” (Spinelli, 2007, 2010) for much longer than I was used to with questions like:

- *What do you experience when you feel stress during your work day?*
- *What kind of situations is it? Can you give some examples?*
- *What does that mean to you? What do you tell yourself?*
- *How does it make you feel?*

My experience of this was that I felt overwhelmed with the amount of information, and by not knowing which statements were important and which were not. I had the feeling that the participants’ stories just kept on opening up, but tried to give myself time to reflect between the questions and relax as much as possible in order not to put myself under pressure or the participants under pressure. However, this type of questioning was very demanding for the participants. Two of them told me in their feedback that they had difficulty in following my questions because they found them too open. It was a critical phase in the study because even though I had explained that I would be mostly listening and asking for their experiences in the first sessions, I realised that they were expecting to get something more out of it.

For the third round of sessions based on the work in the first two sessions, I prepared interventions in order to try to help the participants identify some essential existential tensions (Deurzen, 2002; Deurzen & Adams, 2011; Spinelli, 2007, 2008a; Wahl, 2003). We then compared their immediate intentions with their deep held values and tried to work on how the appearing dilemmas were contributing to their experience of distress. For example, Jane's immediate distress emerged from social relations primarily at work, and we worked with some of the 'crucial polarities' within the social world as described by Deurzen (2002, p. 69).

Dominance - **Submission**
Acceptance - **Rejection**

This turned out extremely helpful for Jane. She discovered that on the one hand, because she was driven by a desire to be in control and not to show any kind of weakness she had a dominant behaviour and aggressive attitude towards others. On the other hand, what Jane really wished for was to feel accepted – avoiding her deepest fear - to be rejected. So it suddenly became clear for her that she expected to be accepted by others, but that her own behaviour was dominating and not accepting of them. This is a short transcript from session 3:

Jane: I don't accept that they don't listen... because I give them the solution.
Anne: But you say that the acceptance that you seek - is to get accepted as you are...that you are strong and have good advice and that you feel rejected when they don't accept your advice. But what happens if they come to you and say that there is something they cannot do?
Jane: Then I try to tell them that they can do it, that they have to believe in themselves.
Anne: Do you accept them then?
Jane: No! I don't accept that people say that there is something they can't do.
Anne: So, what is it that you actually do?
Jane: I reject them! But I get sad when they say that they can't do it.
Anne: You get sad when there is something people cannot do. What do you get sad about?
Jane: That they give up
Anne: Whose concern is this?
Jane: Mine! Laughing. I really get sad when I don't believe that they can do it.
Anne: This decision... that it is not ok to be weak (to admit that there is something you cannot do). Whose decision is that?
Jane: It's mine – and it is not accepting of others!

This is what Spinelli calls existential confrontation of the client's currently held worldview – to investigate for example 'What fits/does not fit between the being you say you are and the narratives you provide regarding that being?' (2007, p. 130).

It was difficult for me to work with existential tensions. I found myself explaining the theory to the participants several times. This could of course be seen as me being open about my learning processes – which I tried to be – but it was definitely also an expression of my insecurity – 'hiding behind theory' (Deurzen & Adams, 2011, p. 52). I have learned that phenomenological work was hard work for me too. I felt drawn into their experience but, at the same time it was important that I did not get overwhelmed by their feelings because trust was also about for them to know that I could take it. This was not a problem in the sessions, but I was drained in terms of energy in between and have learned that giving myself time, doing a lot of reflection and getting supervision was important for me.

During Phase Two, going from the explicit to the implicit was another extremely valuable and powerful way of challenging the participant's narrative. For example, Peter and I had been working

with what it meant to 'be strong' and to 'be in control'. His specific conviction was that he was weak if he had to admit there was something he could not do. In session four I asked him:

- Anne: *Is it 'being strong' not to be able to admit that there is something you cannot do?*
Peter: *Uhm...*
Anne: *What are the unwanted consequences for you of this way of being?*
Peter: *Uhm... unwanted consequences... that I have put a pressure on myself that I will never be able to live up to. So I don't know if I can get ever away from that stress.*
Anne: *So, you seem to be captured in your own ambition about what you want to be able to do. Is that control - to be captured?*
Peter: *No, that's not control.*
Anne: *So, if that is not control, what would real control be for you?*
Peter: *To be able to set myself free*

In this middle phase I had the feeling of being idealized in different ways especially by Søren and Jane. But I also found myself being more directive than I had been previously; I talked more and had a tendency to explain theory. So at this point I was irritated with myself because I felt this changed position in the relationship. The following is a quotation from my journal:

I find it really difficult and I think that I'm trying too hard. The participants are just becoming aware of how their behaviour and relation to themselves are influencing their feeling of distress. I think they may be putting up resistance towards this responsibility. It is tough and they are probably trying to avoid this by giving me the feeling that I'm the one who knows best.

One of the things that I wanted to do differently at this point, when the relationship had become strong enough, was to change my language in order to stimulate the participant's sense of responsibility. This example is from session five with Søren:

- Anne: *What is important for you here, what is it that you are afraid to lose?*
Søren: *If we take what we talked about just before, about having success, it has to do with how I experience that other people see me.*
Anne: *So you are afraid of not being seen as someone who does things perfectly...*
Søren: *Yes, that's right*

This change in my position and persistent use of language focused on awareness of self and responsibility for feelings and intentions was one of the most important elements in phase two. I shifted from just understanding to being the other and representing the outside world. My journal reads:

I feel that I have been holding on to reality from first to last minute in the sessions and – I know that they have experienced it as rather hard. I'm trying to balance how to be a nice person they can trust without literally being nice! It is not nice what we are doing and it is not comforting – I have to be honest with myself as well as with them all the time.

In Phase Three we were primarily consolidating and integrating change in relation to the participants' work life and life in general and it was therefore future orientated. We explored how the participants perceived the new experiences, and how this was prove of a new way of relating to themselves and others and actually taking themselves and others more seriously. Pointing out to the participants how they have actually done things differently and trusting this experience turned out very important in this last phase.

Participants Journey

The following section describes three of the six participants' stories as well as my reflection of the key helping elements.

Peter

Peter was extremely unsatisfied with his workplace to a point that he was angry and embarrassed. He could not identify with the place, but felt stuck because he benefited from the organisation funding his education. Even though Peter was heading for his second masters in education he found it very difficult to live with his own decision of remaining at his present workplace in order to finish the education. He was very stressed about not being able to do something about it because he otherwise saw himself as an energetic and goal oriented person.

Peter was thus very confused about himself and his life. He was not sure who he was and what his talents were and he felt that he had lost direction in life – like wandering around in a fog. His only big interest and joy was sports training and he had a 15 hours weekly training program which he did not deviate from. But Peter expressed loss of meaning and happiness in life.

The coaching process

Exploring his worldview it became clear to Peter that his only feeling of success was in the physical world. But his training had come to an extreme. He felt addicted to it and excluded himself from a lot of social activity with his friends and girlfriend. However Peter did not see this as a problem. In the first phase of the coaching process we worked with the meaning and value that Peter attached to his physical training, his education and his job. Peter was extremely sensitive to critique and he had very high expectations of himself. He discovered that he had been taking on inauthentic roles in his work life as well as in his private life in order to live up to his high expectations to himself and to obtain a feeling of recognition.

Through phase two we primarily worked with the themes – the value and meaning of being strong/weak and being in control/letting go. Peter seemed to be deceiving himself about the importance of his physical training and he discovered that that he was primarily living in the future both concerning training and education. Every time Peter reached a goal – graduating with an MBA or completing a marathon, the value that he had attached to it disappeared. And he would immediately chase something new. But how could this meaning suddenly disappear? Peter discovered that the value and meaning he had attached to these goals were through the eyes of other people. He did not really enjoy the journey of getting there because he did not live in the here and now - only for a goal. We worked with how he made meaning of things. 'I don't know who I'm trying to impress' and 'I'm having unrealistic expectations to other people' are some of the insights that Peter had during this phase. In the last session he explained that he had changed his view on other people expectations of him. He had a sense of peace because the yearning for something indefinable had gone and that he was happy for the first time in a long time.

Trust in our coaching relationship was the most significant feature. Peter described to me in his feedback that he was surprised about his honesty with me, and thus with himself, about how troubled he was. I challenged Peter a lot and I kept on challenging him persistently when I sensed that something in his worldview did not fit. He really appreciated, especially by the end of the coaching process that I held on to key elements and did not let him get away with deceiving himself.

In Peter's feedback he asked me directly to challenge him more. This was a difficult balance for me because on the one hand he was very stuck about certain issues and on the other hand he kept on asking me to challenge him on these. So whose responsibility was it to push the progress? I felt a pressure from his side to take on this responsibility for him because he would lean back and find it very difficult and at the same time ask me for help. This situation was challenging for two reasons. First I believe that it was at the core of his developmental process of taking on responsibility for his

feelings and actions; and second it was a huge challenge for me, because I found it difficult not to be able to help him and therefore it was tempting for me to accept this responsibility when he was stuck. The way for me to work with this has been constant focus and awareness of this sense of responsibility and how it expressed itself in the language – both mine and his.

Claus

Claus felt that he had to take on every task and solve it at once. He was driven by the feeling of an urge to constantly do a better job and improve customer relations, but there simply was not time enough for this. He found it extremely difficult to prioritise and to say no to new tasks because it would compromise this feeling of recognition. Claus was constantly behind with several tasks and suffered from constant guilt towards customers, his company and his family and he had been very stressed about this for quite some time.

The coaching process

Claus had a specific wish for the coaching to help him become more relaxed about his work and to get rid of the feeling of guilt. But every time we got near his beliefs and values about his work he became completely stuck. Even though he understood his dilemma quite clearly, he could not see how he could change anything. It simply did not make sense to him because his job would lose its meaning. Being faced with the fact that something had to change he discovered another very strong belief, 'I have to do things by myself,' that he was able to work with. Having worked with his values and meaning of job satisfaction Claus could identify different types of tasks that he did not necessarily have to do himself. So he began to cooperate with one of his colleagues who could take over these tasks.

I was quite confused about Claus for many sessions because he kept on asking for help for a substantial change in his attitude towards his job, but simply resisted this when I challenged him. I thought for a while that I was not able to help him at all. What helped him in the end was to be much more aware about what really mattered to him about his job and the type of recognition he would not do without. This has made him able to let go of less important tasks.

Susanne

Susanne saw herself, as a leader, as someone who had to be in charge of things – and that she had to direct and control other people. She saw it as a weakness to show feelings and she had taught herself to shut out her feelings in order to stay in control. Susanne feared chaos from not being in control, and she saw control as her way of functioning. But she experienced that she could only control things when she was physically there and she found this disturbing and limiting to her freedom. Susanne wanted to be in control of things, but the feeling of having to control stressed her.

The coaching process

During the coaching we worked with what Susanne's experienced as a need for control – how it worked for her, what control allowed and hindered in her role as a leader and the feelings involved - for example:

- Feeling inadequate when she could not be there to solve the conflicts
- Believing that people had to be managed but doing it with a feeling of sacrifice
- Feeling alone and insecure about what new decisions would lead to
- Wanting to avoid chaos and using control as a feeling of protection

Susanne explored how being in control had served her well earlier in her life when she was alone with her two young children and as a prison officer. She also discovered how being in control today limited her a lot in her role as team leader. Susanne had ambitions as a leader and she knew that team dynamic and creative processes were not possible with her needing to be in control of what was

happening all the time. Subsequently, Susanne decided to draw back and involve the team in the decision making processes. Susanne succeeded with this and found herself to be more flexible.

One of the aspects of the coaching that was particularly helpful for Susanne was discussing freedom as a polarity of control. The possibility of not just letting go of control, but that freedom to decide to let go of something was another form of control. Understanding her feelings better and working with these actively, Susanne succeeded in letting go of some of the destructive forms of control for the team without being overwhelmed by insecurity.

Susanne was very comfortable in our working relationship and she did a lot of work. After six sessions her team was working much better and the feeling of stress had gone. So we decide to terminate the sessions.

Discussion and conclusions

Two themes have emerged from the coaching process for all of the participants - the wish for control and the wish for recognition. For Jane control appeared as an extreme demand on herself to be able to handle all situations, but this striving towards control also made her feel rejected. Peter felt in control of things, but he was stressed by a loss of meaning in life. Claus believed that he could avoid chaos by constantly improving his own performance. However, this extreme focus on the here and now made him lose the big picture completely and he was extremely stressed by all the things he never got around to do. Søren tried to stay in control by doing things perfectly, but the real control he exerted was keeping other people at a distance because he believed that he was less capable of speaking up for himself. Susanne wanted to avoid chaos and believed that control was the solution, but she suffocated from having to stay in control.

The gains from working with the idea of control in this study about stress confirms that we need to understand the significance of the meaning that people ascribe to their experience of being under pressure by exploring the origin of emotions, values, beliefs and aspirations (Arthur, 2004; Briner et al., 2004; Cooper, 2001; Dewe & Trenberth, 2004; Folkman, 2008; Lazarus 1999). It also confirms Folkman's (2008) point of the stressful element of giving up previously valued goals based on fundamental beliefs must not be underestimated. If this is true, the need for change becomes the stressing element itself and the important question is how this need for change is experienced.

For Peter the need for change expressed itself in the fact that the value he had attached to obtaining a specific goal (e.g. the MBA) is not there when he graduates, and he was extremely stressed by this lack of meaning because his whole identity was tied to it. So in the coaching we focused on taking the value and meaning that he himself attached to different things more seriously in order to be able to find the courage to let go of only 'seeing value in the eyes of others'. This type of conflict is dissonant (Spinelli, 2010, 2008, 2008a, 2007) and occurs because of a gap between his attempt to make meaning of the world and his actual experience of being in that world. Claus on the other hand experiences a consonant conflict (Spinelli, 2010, 2008, 2008a, 2007), as his conflict arises out of an undivided stance because he has chosen to be and relate in a specific way. This type of conflict has less to do with change and more to do with accepting and embracing the unwanted consequences as well. For Claus this was accepting help from others.

Stress seems to originate from a feeling of being under pressure to change. Furthermore, even though recognition plays a central role, the need for control seems to be vital; and controlled ways of perceiving recognition - often rejecting it or simply rejecting other's opinions altogether seem to create a vicious circle. So, I further believe that this need for control is maintained through not being open to experience (holding on to known ways of understanding) and that this is the main contributor to distress, because it rejects new ways of perceiving the world that could throw light on the dilemma,

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and bring new possibilities of choice. Thus, I argue that working existentially with clients who experience stress should be a helpful approach.

Not being open to experience stems from a variety of sources and I have experienced that the existential phenomenological model has been very helpful for the participants in creating awareness of these sources. Opening up to their experiences, however, was very challenging and it took a lot of courage. This would not have been possible if they did not trust me and knew that they could rely on our relationship. Thus the coaching relationship's primary function has been for them to learn to relate to another person in a new way and to trust that interrelatedness. The phenomenological way of exploring their worldview has meant that participants' experience is taken seriously and slowly they began to learn to take themselves seriously, maybe for the first time in their lives. This I believe is the whole essence of this way of relating to each other.

This was a very intense experience for me with all the participants. I tried to understand their position as precisely as I could – experiencing their way of being and relating. Deurzen (2010) calls this way of relating 'resonance' during which the therapists 'lend themselves temporarily to identify with the client's position' (p. 257). I cannot see specifically in the feedback that this is what the participants have experienced, but I have been very touched by three of the participants who have had some tough experiences. With the others I felt a deep engagement and concentration and very often, in phase one, been in a state of flow where I lost sense of myself.

This deeply engaged and dedicated way of experiencing the participants' troublesome dilemmas made them feel understood and cared about and having earned their trust I could begin to challenge their stories and self-deceptions in phase two. The mechanism is, I believe, that they were overwhelmed by their feelings of being stuck in the dilemma, but experiencing that I understood them yet did not get overwhelmed, made them find the courage to look at it in a new and more truthful way. This 'commitment to truth' (Deurzen, 2010, p. 256) is a psychological contract that is necessary for the relationship to work in the best interest of the client. Through the coaching relationship and the language used specifically to create awareness of responsibility and choice, the participants learned to take a position in which they could find the courage to discuss, face and understand their reality and subsequently bring this new learning into their wider lives.

I have presented some answers through this study to how existential coaching can be a way of working with stress that contributes to the research with further knowledge of what our clients are trying to cope with and how they can be helped. It seems that stress is a reaction to being under pressure for changing a way of being, but at the same time resisting this change because of fear of what may happen. The study has shown that this resistance expresses itself in a wish for control and not being open toward new ways of perceiving and understanding oneself and the world. Therefore, the coaching relationship can be understood as a way of teaching the coaching client an existential attitude of openness to experience that will be a possible way of gaining insight into their own worldview and thus being able to make decisions based on this knowledge and awareness.

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