

Resilience Coaching



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Introduction

I've long been interested in resilience particularly focusing on stories of people who survived very dark times (e.g. Nazi concentration camps) and were certainly marked but not broken by their experiences and managed to find meaning, purpose and happiness in their post-adversity lives. They refused to become trapped in embittered victimhood as a result of these grim experiences. What were the qualities they possessed that enabled them to survive and thrive? (Some qualities associated with resilience will be discussed later.) Whatever life throws at you, life events requiring resilient responding to them can be viewed along a scale of severity from the unpleasant experiences of daily life (e.g. bullying boss, partner's affair) to highly traumatic experiences (e.g. being raped). The strength of your resilience response in combatting these events will probably vary throughout your life.

When I entered the world of mental health as a trainee in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), the focus was on maladaptive responses to adversity. Mental health was a misnomer: it was mental ill-health that was the real subject. The resilience literature, on the other hand, examined the factors that contributed to successful adaptation to adverse events—what the person was doing right. Resilience is often viewed as the bedrock of positive mental health (Persaud, 2001). I was having a parallel education: understanding both maladaptive and adaptive responses to tough times. I eventually married my two interests by developing resilience through the application of cognitive behavioural psychology (Neenan, 2017).

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Rational-Emotive Cognitive-Behavioural Coaching (RE-CBC)

Rational-emotive cognitive-behavioural coaching (RE-CBC) is derived from the theory and practice of two leading cognitive behavioural theorists, therapists and researchers: the late Albert Ellis (REBT) and Aaron Beck (CBT). The cornerstone of RE-CBC is eliciting clients' appraisals of troublesome events (internal and external) in order to understand and help them to change their unproductive emotional and behavioural reactions to these events. What we think (our attitudes, beliefs, meanings) and how we think (the way information is processed to arrive at our conclusions about the self, others and the world) are of particular interest in RE-CBC. Following on from this, RE-CBC can be defined as:

helping individuals to develop their capabilities in order to achieve their goals in selected areas with a particular focus on the beliefs, emotions and behaviours that help or hinder this development (Neenan & Dryden, 2014).

For example, a manager working in a high pressure environment had to deal with over 200 emails a day and wanted to learn 'greater email efficiency' in order to reduce the times she felt anxious and overwhelmed by this onslaught ('It's doing my head in', i.e. perceived loss of control). When she thought like this, she avoided her emails which then added to the backlog. As her coach, we devised an email classification system (immediate response, today, tomorrow, next few days, delegate) and brief criteria for choosing each category as well as increasing the time she spent on her emails by taking it from other areas such as having shorter team and individual meetings. These measures restored her self-confidence, her anxiety and avoidance dropped sharply: 'I'm controlling the flow of emails now rather than me believing they're driving me round the bend!'

Before we move on, a brief mention of the different types of coaching where RE-CBC is applied:

- Life Coaching—helping people to become self-empowered to achieve their goals including workplace ones;
- Skills coaching—learning a new skill and/or improving an existing one;
- Performance coaching—closing the gap between actual and desired performance;
- Resilience coaching—developing a resilience improvement plan (RIP), i.e. how to make yourself more resilient;
- Developmental coaching—longer-term, open-ended approach which usually focuses on fundamental personal and professional issues (as shown in the coaching case example later in this chapter).

RE-CB coaches, like coaching in general, do not see clients seeking primary help for clinical problems (e.g. severe depression or panic disorder) but emotional problems usually appear at some stage of the coaching process such as procrastination, having a short fuse when under pressure or worried about being seen as weak or incompetent. RE-CBC has many of the characteristics associated with the general model of coaching: staying mainly in the present (information from the past is

collected if needed to clarify the client's current concerns), setting goals, devising action plans, improving clients' self-regulatory skills to keep them goal-focused, monitoring progress, teaching problem-solving skills, dealing with psychological blocks to change (coaches without a background in psychology are often taught the ABCDE model of psychological problem solving which is explained later in this chapter; see Landsberg [2015]). Therefore, this close fit between the specialisation of RE-CBC and the general form of coaching leads Grant (2012: xv) to state that 'the cognitive behavioural approach is fundamental to coaching'.

Resilience training and RE-CBC also have a very good fit. Leading resilience experts, Reivich and Shatté, in their book *The Resilience Factor* (Reivich & Shatté, 2002:11) write: 'Our research has demonstrated that ...the principal obstacle to tapping into our inner strength lies with our cognitive style – ways of looking at the world and interpreting events that every one of us develops from childhood.'

When I, among others, adapted CBT to become RE-CBC (Neenan, 2008; Neenan & Palmer, 2012; Neenan & Dryden, 2014), I offered resilience as the framework within which coaching issues could be discussed. I wasn't imposing this framework. Companies invited me to run resilience-building workshops and individuals contacted me with their 'How do I make myself more resilient?' requests. Resilience is a subject of enduring interest to individuals, groups and organizations (Flach, 2004; Pemberton, 2015; Southwick & Charney, 2012). Reivich & Shatté (2002: 1) put the case for the importance of resilience:

Everyone needs resilience. More than fifty years of scientific research have powerfully demonstrated that resilience is the key to success at work and satisfaction in life. Where you fall on the resilience curve – your natural reserves of resilience – affects your performance in school and at work, your physical health, your mental health, and the quality of your relationships. It is the basic ingredient to happiness and success.

Given that everyone has some degree of resilience—it's often said that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary—the focus with some of my coaching clients is on those areas where their 'natural reserves of resilience' are depleted and there's usually a frustrating sense of little or no forward momentum, no matter what they try. This depletion usually results in faltering performance, reduced productivity, constricted thinking and low self-confidence, e.g. 'It feels as if I've lost control and nothing works'. These clients often succumb to the 'tyranny of the shoulds' (Horney, 1950) such as 'This shouldn't be happening to me', 'I should have sorted it out by now' or 'I shouldn't be put in a position where others can see I'm not coping very well'. I once saw a client who believed that her resilience strengths were dependable and durable for every adverse situation she encountered in her life and was surprised and irritated to learn that when circumstances changed, her level of resilience altered (she came to coaching because the advance of her career plan wasn't keeping in step with her timetable for it).

What Is Resilience?

The popular but misleading view of resilience is bouncing back from adversity. This definition is misleading because bouncing back suggests only one speed of recovery; little, if any, emotional pain and struggle are experienced and your life returns to the pre-adversity status quo. More accurately, there are different speeds of recovery from tough times (coming back), more often than not ‘suffering and struggle are experienced in forging resilience’ (Walsh, 2016: 5) and what you’ve learned from these experiences can result in your life not returning to its pre-adversity state. A definition of resilience I would offer is:

Marshalling your resources (e.g. psychological, spiritual, social) to cope adaptively with tough times and emerging from them sometimes a better, stronger, wiser person.

I say ‘sometimes’ because the uses of adversity (to borrow Shakespeare’s phrase from *As you Like It*, Act II, Scene 1: Line 12) may be used up when the adversity has passed and any lessons learnt are now forgotten. A widespread definition of resilience I heard while running courses in companies was ‘You suck it up and move forward’. This suggested the image of hardy individuals withstanding the hard knocks of corporate life, learning valuable lessons in the process, which were then carried forward into their next task or project. But I also saw ‘sucking it up’ often being used as a mantra, a reflexive response to others’ enquiries as to how the individual was coping, with no real psychological processing of events in order to improve resilient responding to future workplace challenges (the coaching case study shows mantras being used without any favourable impact on the client).

Some people like to call themselves ‘a resilient person’ as if they’re stress-resistant to whatever life throws at them, but the reality is more complex:

Resilience should not be conceptualized as a static trait or characteristic of an individual. Resilience arises from many processes and interactions that extend beyond the boundaries of the human organism, including close relationships and social support. Moreover, an individual person may be resilient with respect to some kinds of stressors and not others (Masten & Wright, 2010: 215).

There is no automatic transfer of resilience attitudes and skills from situation to situation, so the person may demonstrate varying levels of resilience in each one as well as during different life stages; for example, he copes well with hard times when younger because he has a lot of social support whereas later in life when he is socially isolated his struggles are longer and harder to endure.

However, it should be pointed out that there is empirical support for both a trait (i.e. stable personality characteristic) vs. process (i.e. dynamic interaction of internal and external factors) view of resilience (Reich, Zautra, & Hall, 2010). So a trait approach would include attributes such as self-acceptance, openness to experience, not dependent on others’ approval and a high threshold for tolerating frustration and discomfort. These attributes function as protective factors, i.e. acting as a buffer against hard times.

A point of interest for me in developing resilience programmes is when individuals maintain a rigid adherence to their preferred coping strategies when one of the hallmarks of a resilient outlook is flexibility of response to changing circumstance. For example, one person favours self-reliance (trait approach) but refuses to accept help when she clearly needs it while another person looks to relationships (process approach) to sustain him but won't learn to develop more self-support activities as support from others recedes. The first person fears being seen as weak for accepting help while the second person is reluctant to put in the effort to build these activities and believes they won't really help him.

Resilience has traditionally been discussed in the context of adversity but in recent years this discussion has been expanded to teach people resilience attitudes and skills to cope with the vicissitudes of daily life (Brooks & Goldstein, 2003). For example, some schools provide resilience training to run alongside their pupils' academic studies. Resilience is a quality sought in employees (Coutu, 2003) and career resilience (Grotberg, 2003) is required to keep adapting to a constantly changing work environment. So, what are some of the qualities that underpin a resilience outlook (this is a non-definitive list)?

- Keeping things in perspective: appraising events in a calm and measured way that enables the person to distinguish between what aspects of a situation are within her control to change and which ones are not.
- Self-acceptance: refraining from self-rating (e.g. 'I'm a failure') but rating aspects of the self such as certain behaviours and attitudes ('They're unhelpful') that interfere with goal-achievement. When adversity strikes, it's important to accept yourself for the emotional conflicts—e.g. 'Why me?' despair alternating with 'Get on with it!' grit—and intermittently faltering behavioural progress that are usually part of the struggle instead of berating yourself for not rising immediately to the challenge of adversity and overcoming it with faultless determination (this might be a perfectionist's definition of resilience).
- Flexible: the ability to think and act flexibly in the face of challenging and changing circumstances rather than locked into a fixed mindset of how things should or shouldn't be without any accompanying evidence to support the person's viewpoint.
- Support from others: asking for or accepting support in your time of need. Resilience is not developed in social isolation. Positive relationships are seen as a key protective factor across the lifespan when hard times arrive (Masten & Wright, 2010).
- Self-control—directing your mind and behaviour to carry out the steps required to achieve your goals and restraining the impulses that interfere with this process or threaten to undermine it such as not making decisions based on how you feel in the moment (e.g. comfort eating because you're upset) but how you want to feel at a later date (e.g. pleased with losing two stone).
- Curiosity: trying things out, asking questions, making discoveries to increase understanding of yourself and the world around you.

- Humour: finding light moments in dark times and, more generally, not taking oneself too seriously.
- Finding meaning: to guide a person through hard times towards a brighter future.

The word ‘resilience’ contains some of the qualities of a resilient outlook:

Reacting adaptively to adverse events
 Effort to find solutions to problems
 Seeking or accepting support when needed
 Insight into what can and cannot be changed
 Laughter to lighten dark times
 Internal locus of control
 Enduring discomfort and distress
 New ways of seeing things (finding meaning)
 Cognitive and behavioural flexibility
 Engaging in positive relationships

Before explaining and discussing these qualities with clients, the coach should elicit their views of resilience and then compare them with his presentation of the subject. In essence, clients are receiving an education in how to make themselves more resilient. Also, client strengths should be listed—these can be revealed by asking for episodes of successful problem solving. Strengths can be built on and new ones learnt. For example, a client develops greater self-control by following the coach’s suggestion of giving herself a daily dose of discomfort (spending an hour each day on tackling previously avoided paperwork) until the backlog is cleared. A new strength to learn is often self-acceptance as so many psychological problems in both coaching and therapy stem from self-depreciation. Extra-session activities based on internalizing self-acceptance would be clients placing themselves in situations where they, not just their opinions, are likely to be criticized, ridiculed or rejected (but not in situations where there could be a threat of physical harm).

Emotion and Behaviour in Resilience

Resilient responding to adversity is neither the absence of emotion (admitting to or showing negative emotion might be seen as a weakness) nor trying to feel positive about what’s happening to you (looking on the bright side rather than acknowledging how you really feel). Resilience is about managing emotions, not suppressing or manufacturing them. The only way that you can have an unemotional response to an event is if you truly don’t care what has happened to you because the event has absolutely no significance for you. By definition, adversities are negative events which trigger negative emotions because we didn’t want these unpleasant events to have occurred. However, since resilience depends on being flexible in thought and action when responding to adversity, you’re not stuck in your negative feelings. These feelings only become problematic when they stop you from taking positive steps to change a situation which can be changed (e.g. improving your work performance) or adjusting constructively to it if it cannot be changed (e.g. you’re sacked).

As resilience involves struggling to find a constructive way forward during tough times, you might believe that you have to win every struggle you're engaged in otherwise you're not demonstrating resilience. Not so. Being highly resilient is something to strive towards but is never perfectly executed at all times in all adverse situations. Bearing this in mind, acting resiliently can be seen as a ratio between helpful and unhelpful behaviour in pursuit of one's goals (e.g. executing helpful behaviour 80% of the time and unhelpful behaviour 20% of the time). So resilience does involve acting non-resiliently at times or, maybe more accurately, what appears to be non-resilient to the observer of the person's behaviour and/or the person's own self-observation.

The resilient mind is not calculating moment by moment which actions are helpful or unhelpful; that's too much to expect in the midst of adversity. You would have to be omniscient to decide that each step taken is not only the correct one but also in the right road-to-recovery sequence. In retrospect, you can see where your behaviour was more productive, more of the time. When tough times arrive, knowing theoretically there's a constructive way to deal with them is not the same process as being able to specify in concrete terms what it is, and it may take some time before this way becomes clear in your mind.

The resilient mind is both fallible and exhaustible so it will reach the limits of its *current* flexible thinking and behaviour about how to deal with this continuing adversity—you don't have unlimited adaptability. The person might say at this point: 'I really don't know what to do. It's seems hopeless.' The person hasn't now become non-resilient! A period of brooding introspection, an anguished search for a way to revive himself and return to flexible thinking and action is in itself an attempt at problem solving. To the resilient mind, no experience is wasted as everything is grist to its learning mill. The question to ask is: overall, am I headed in the right direction?

So, dealing with hard times involves despair and determination, trial and error—this is all part and parcel of struggling resiliently. Maybe to the observer with his checklist of resilience attributes and timelines (e.g. weeks vs. months) in determining the cut-off point between resilient and non-resilient behaviour wouldn't see or understand this. That's why I prefer my term 'coming back' to the popular one of 'bouncing back' as it allows for different speeds of and pathways to recovery from misfortune.

To return to the ratio between helpful and unhelpful behaviour, it's important to ensure that your resilience balance sheet shows more assets (occurrences of helpful behaviour) than liabilities (occurrences of unhelpful behaviour). For example, during a period of unwanted unemployment and unsuccessful job interviews, most of a person's days are structured with meaningful activities (80%) while on other days he lapses into inertia and 'What's the point?' brooding (20%).

Resilience and Self-Acceptance

Self-acceptance promotes long-term psychological stability (but not unwaveringly so) and quickens the process of self-righting (i.e. returning to normal functioning) when your life takes some unexpected knocks as your focus and energy is on problem solving such as finding another job, not berating yourself for losing it. In contrast, self-depreciation means you give yourself two or more problems for the price of one. For example, (a) losing your job, (b) calling yourself a failure, (c) rowing more with your wife, (d) increasing your drinking, (e) retreating into social isolation, (f) shouting frequently at the children, and (g) not looking for another job. So how many problems do you want to deal with I ask my clients? Self-acceptance—fewer; self-depreciation—more.

Linking self-acceptance to resilience is a frequent discussion point as many business people I've coached over the years base their self-worth on how tough and successful they are (being seen as weak is a big fear). Some clients are not interested in learning self-acceptance as they believe it's impossible or unnatural not to rate themselves. With these clients, I try to encourage them to develop a multidimensional identity ('Remember the other things about yourself', e.g. marathon runner, family man, community activist) to face life's challenges thereby not putting all their eggs (i.e. their worth) into one basket (e.g. 'My work is my worth', unidimensional). So an important loss (e.g. not getting a promotion) is viewed in relative, not absolute terms, as the other dimensions of the person provide a sense of a continuing favourable identity, not a loss of identity. Another way of dealing with self-depreciation is to make it time limited, e.g. 30 min a day for a week. Clients frequently state they got bored with their self-attacking and grudgingly focused on problem solving.

The Process of Rational Emotive Cognitive Behavioural Coaching

Clients usually contact me to improve their current responding to events such as 'I want to be quicker off the mark in dealing with a crisis'; 'I can't seem to cope with this situation and I feel I should be coping with it'; 'I want to learn to take criticism without feeling hard done by' or 'I've hit a brick wall in my career. I can't understand it' (this client thought he had an unlimited adaptive capacity). RE-CBC and resilience are explained and how they are linked can be shown in this quote from the philosopher Anthony Grayling (2005: 23):

Attitude is very consequential stuff. It determines everything one does, from falling in love to voting for one candidate rather than another. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry [French author and aviator] said, 'The meaning of things lies not in things themselves, but in our attitudes towards them.'

Understanding *meaning* is at the heart of RE-CBC and resilience. The quickest way to discover if a person is ‘struggling well’—Higgin’s (1994) wonderfully pithy description of resilience—is to reveal her attitudes to coping with adversity. However, a snapshot taken at a particular moment of her ‘struggling well’ progress does not guarantee an accurate prediction of its outcome as she might give up if she encounters too many setbacks. Conversely, someone struggling poorly might eventually receive some unexpected social support which enables him to achieve a favourable outcome to his troubles.

RE-CBC and the development of a resilient outlook both see taking responsibility as fundamental to achieving a person’s desired goals: she is responsible for her thoughts, feelings, behaviours and for carrying out her goal-related tasks. Trouble arises and blocks development if a client blames others for his cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions to events and/or expects others to make the path to goal-achievement easy for him.

In the next section, we look at the RE-CBC sequence: (1) Relationship building; (2) Assessment and goal-setting; (3) Interventions; (4) Extra-session tasks; (5) Review of tasks.

The Rational Emotive Cognitive Behavioural Coaching Sequence

The typical structure of a coaching session is reviewing the client’s extra-session goal-related tasks; selecting issues for discussion; agreeing on further tasks to be carried out and obtaining client feedback on how the session went. Initially, agreement is reached on the number of coaching sessions. This number can change depending on how coaching unfolds. When coaching ends, progress is summarized, lessons learnt are reviewed and a few follow-up sessions can be arranged in order to determine if the client’s gains from coaching are being maintained.

Relationship Building

The coaching relationship can be seen as a partnership in problem solving: the coach helping to widen the client’s constricted/rigid perspective to see what other options are available to assist his goal-directed striving and the client choosing what options to pursue which might also help him to interpret events in a more flexible way—‘I like your idea of my first thoughts not automatically being my best thoughts and through the process of rethinking I’ve found a better way to deal with the situation’. Problems should not be automatically equated with psychological blocks: solving the former can be a relatively straightforward process through the client’s adoption of an experimental outlook (e.g. starting boring paperwork earlier rather

than later) whereas the latter are usually ingrained beliefs that can be hard to change and the client is often ambivalent about changing them, e.g. ‘It’s natural for me to see anything less than a hundred per cent as failure. If I modify my beliefs, I’ll become a mediocrity. Who wants a living death?’

Clients are encouraged to see the workplace as a laboratory where they test new ideas and behaviours—an empirical approach—and also to emphasize that trying things out doesn’t mean instant success and revisions have to be made to the coaching plan in the light of incoming information from these various workplace experiments. Difficulties in the coaching relationship such as the client’s brusque manner or the coach’s long-winded explanations can be resolved through ‘metacommunication’ (Safran & Muran, 2000). For example, the coach and client stepping outside of the strained relationship in order to comment upon it in a non-blaming spirit of collaborative inquiry. The coach carries the main responsibility for initiating and keeping open this metacommunication channel.

Assessment and Goal-Setting

Once RE-CBC has been explained and informed consent given to proceed, an initial and usually brief assessment is carried out which focuses on the client’s concerns, the context in which they arise, what the client’s wishes to achieve in coaching and any additional information she would like to add to the assessment. The assessment can be updated and refined as coaching proceeds. In RE-CBC ‘there is no need for an in-depth assessment and case conceptualisation unless a particular problem or issue is difficult to resolve’ (Palmer & Szymanska, 2007: 89). Clients’ strengths are listed to help in achieving their coaching goals as well as reminding them of their past problem-solving successes and their ability to persevere when misfortune strikes.

Goals are specified in clear, specific and measurable terms so progress monitoring can be conducted. Also, it’s important to establish that the goals are within the client’s control to achieve. Goal-negotiation is often required to clarify the difference between control and influence, e.g. ‘I want to make my colleagues respect me’ (that’s up to them to decide) versus ‘I want to make some changes in my behaviour which I hope will lead to gaining their respect’ (this outcome could occur). Goals should be stated in positive terms (what you want to achieve) rather than in negative terms (what you want to stop doing). As Cormier and Cormier (1985: 223) observe:

When the goal is stated positively, clients are more likely to encode and rehearse the things they want to be able to do rather than the things they want to avoid or stop. For example, it is fairly easy to generate an image of yourself watching TV. However, picturing yourself *not* watching TV is difficult (emphasis in original).

However, not all clients are interested in specifying concrete and measurable goals; some will advance general aims for the coaching conversation, e.g. ‘I want to explore different ways of dealing with things, mentally roam so to speak.’ This

discursive approach can trigger anxiety in the RE-CB coach as she is used to establishing clear goals and devising action plans. So the question is: Is the client's request outside of her current coaching competence or is it really her fear that by stepping outside of the familiar she will flounder and be exposed as incompetent? If it's the former, refer elsewhere; if it's the latter, she can see it as an experiment in thinking on her feet (aided by good supervision). If coaches are going to stress the importance of flexible thinking, then they'd better demonstrate it themselves.

Interventions

A significant part of the coach's role is to ask questions in order to probe, clarify and stimulate the client's thinking. Auerbach (2006) calls the cognitive coach's role as being a 'thought partner'. The main questioning method is a Socratic one (derived from the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates). Socratic questions aim to promote reflection, examine thinking, develop new perspectives on problem solving and goal attainment. This information needs to be drawn out of the client (and some of it the client will already know but had forgotten) rather than presented to him by the coach. Questions other than Socratic ones are useful at times.

- Closed ones to focus the client's reply: 'Have you decided which issue to work on first?'
- Confirm what the client has said: 'So, is the sticking point your manager's refusal to apologize?'
- Direct questions to gather assessment information: 'How many times this month have you been late for meetings?'
- Leading questions to test the coach's assumptions: 'It sounds as if you're more worried than excited about the promotion. Is that accurate?'

Even though I've stressed the importance of Socratic questioning, it's incumbent on coaches not to get stuck in Socratic mode because some clients will require direct explanations of RE-CBC concepts and problem-solving methods as this is how they prefer to learn. For example, directly teaching the thought-feeling link—different people having different emotional reactions to the same event based on their idiosyncratic appraisals of this event—is the preference of some clients while others want to work it out for themselves aided by Socratic questions.

Examining a client's self-limiting thoughts and developing self-enhancing alternatives has benefits in terms of neuroplasticity: the lifelong ability of the brain to reorganize neural pathways: 'The mere act of considering an alternative interpretation of a well-worn automatic negative thought [e.g. 'I'll never learn how to do it'] can, over time, help reduce the power of that thought by reducing the strength of its representation in cognitive neural networks' (Treadway, 2015: 95).

Psychological problems pop up

While no assumption is made that psychological problems are lurking in the background and an early start is made on developing goal-focused action plans,

such problems will very often appear for the simple reason that coaching clients, no matter how highly functioning they are, are not exempt from having blind spots, vulnerabilities and weaknesses. So RE-CBC has a twin focus: goal achievement and psychological blocks.

When psychological blocks appear (e.g. low self-esteem), RE-CB therapists who have moved into coaching with their understanding and treatment of psychological disorders are more likely than coaches without a background in mental health to recognize and deal with psychological problems; also, they would be better at judging when it would be appropriate to refer a client for therapy. Coaches without such a background usually choose a non-psychological coaching model such as GROW (**G**oals, **R**eality, **O**ptions and **W**ays forward), a popular behavioural model. GROW coaching may proceed to a successful outcome but if psychological difficulties intrude, the coach may be out of his depth in dealing with them and a referral to a coaching psychology approach is probably indicated.

When psychological blocks interfere with goal-striving, clients can be shown the ABC model (Ellis, 1962) to pinpoint these blocks:

A = activating event or adversity

B = beliefs about A

C = emotional, behavioural and physiological consequences of these beliefs

For example, a client said the issue was ‘being gripped by granularity’ (i.e. bogged down in levels of detail) and thought that some training in task and time management skills would be the solution to loosen this grip. On further investigation he said he would be anxious (C) about reducing the time spent on absorbing detail (A) because ‘I must be able to answer every question comprehensively in order not to be exposed as incompetent and lose the respect of my colleagues’ (B). Clients’ self-defeating beliefs can be discussed (**D** is added the ABC model) along the following lines to help them improve their critical thinking skills. Just before we get to the discussion, it’s important to point out that RE-CBC uses both reason and evidence to acquire knowledge in order to help clients’ develop an adaptive outlook which improves their chances of goal success (**E**, effective new outlook, is the last addition to the ABCD model). The initial questions are closed ones to start the discussion and focus the client’s mind. Once started, a mixture of Socratic questions and direct explanations can be used to further belief examination.

Is your belief rigid or flexible?

This is the difference between a fixed outlook (a prisoner of your beliefs) and one based on personal and professional growth, e.g. ‘I shouldn’t make mistakes!’ versus ‘What can I learn from my mistakes?’ Rigid thinking restricts such growth; flexible thinking promotes it.

Is your belief realistic or unrealistic?

Does the person’s subjective view of the situation correspond with the facts of the situation? The further the person’s viewpoint diverges from empirical reality the more likely he is to develop psychological difficulties (e.g. angry resentment because he didn’t get the promotion he believed should have been his).

Is your belief helpful or unhelpful?

This looks at the practical consequences of holding on to a belief. Are there more costs or benefits from the belief? More costs experienced usually motivate the client to initiate belief change.

Would you teach your belief to others?

If a person thinks her belief, ‘Failing means you’re a failure’, is reasonable—it makes good sense to her—would she teach it to others such as family, friends or colleagues? The answer is invariably ‘No’. Then why does she continue to teach this belief to herself? If a client did say ‘Yes’, then what might be the implications for these others of internalizing this belief?

It’s important not to call clients’ beliefs ‘irrational’ because ‘to dismiss others as irrational [or their beliefs] is to attempt a kind of excommunication from the community of reason when what we should do is keep as many as possible within it’ (Baggini, 2016: 239).

Extra-Session Tasks

The coaching session is usually a poor arena for assessing change because of its removal from a client’s everyday experience. Tasks carried out in the situations where their difficulties occur allow clients to deepen their conviction in the helpfulness of their adaptive beliefs and behaviours. Carrying out these tasks is central to the success of RE-CBC as it teaches clients to become their own coach, i.e. independent problem solver. It’s important that clients see how the task has arisen from discussion in the session and is another step towards achieving their goals: session→task→goal. Tasks are negotiated, not imposed by the coach though she may suggest some in the early sessions if the client can’t think of any appropriate ones. Tasks include behavioural experiments (testing beliefs); reading self-help literature and listening to digital voice recordings (DVRs) of sessions, both to deepen understanding of RE-CBC concepts and practices; writing assignments, e.g. a perfectionist agrees to write an essay entitled ‘Perfection is pitiless: my self-inflicted torments’ (some perfectionists will think this is a price worth paying, but no longer for this particular client).

Review of Extra-Session Tasks

This is usually the first item on the session agenda. Tompkins (2004) suggests 5 Cs for reviewing these tasks.

1. Be consistent—discuss in every session.
2. Be curious—adopt an open-minded, non-judgemental approach particularly if the client hasn’t completed his agreed task.

3. Be complimentary—no matter how small the effort expended in attempting to carry it out.
4. Be careful—don't reinforce task non-compliance by pretending it doesn't matter. Instead, examine the factors that prevented task completion.
5. Consider changing or repeating the task depending on the information that's emerged from the review.

Task review provides the opportunity for valuable lessons to be learnt and strengthened, e.g. the coach concludes the review: 'Each week you're increasing your threshold for tackling unpleasant activities. Previously, you said you couldn't bear doing them but you've learnt you can bear it if it's in your interests to do so in order to achieve your goals.'

Coaching Case Example: Being Business Focused, Not Self-Focused

Sonya (not her real name) contacted me for some coaching and we agreed on an initial six sessions, at which point progress would be reviewed and a decision made on whether to add further sessions. She had her own marketing company advising businesses how best to promote their goods and services. She described herself as very focused, hard-working, resilient, tough-minded (she'd taken two clients to court who didn't pay their bills and won both cases) 'and it takes a hell of a lot to get me down'.

However, (there's usually a 'however' to darken the initially bright picture presented by the client) when she failed to secure a contract after giving a presentation to a company, she would try to reassure herself: 'Win some, lose some. Just move on. It's no failure to experience failure. Successful companies like mine have their share of failures.' Also, she was reluctant to do any cold calling (making unsolicited phone calls to businesses) because she would turn it into a hot (emotionally charged) issue if they weren't interested in her services, so she delegated the task to an employee who she said wasn't very convincing in this role.

Her mantras didn't help her to cope with failure or setbacks because she didn't believe the philosophy underpinning them: failure in life is normal, inevitable but the important point is to distil constructive lessons from these experiences to guide future behaviour. Even though she won more contracts than she lost, she was unable to shrug off the loss because, as she said emphatically, 'They didn't want ME!' proving her worthlessness. She was linking her business performance to her personal worth—'I'm not good enough'. Performance is an aspect of your behaviour which is judged, but it's not a judgement on your worth as a human being. Sonya knew she was doing this but didn't know how to stop herself from engaging in self-depreciation.

Sonya: When I give a presentation it's like facing a row of judges. I have to get the contract because then I have their approval.

Michael: And if you don't get the contract?

Sonya: Then I'll feel rejected. I go home or back to the office in a bad mood. I feel hurt and angry. I need some help with all this. It's been going on for a long time and I can't seem to find it within myself to deal with it.

Michael: Well, we could do self-development coaching where we tackle this vulnerability by learning how to absorb business setbacks without becoming so upset over them that you brood for several days over the perceived unfairness. You can learn to feel disappointed, not disturbed about losing a contract.

Sonya: That sounds good. I want to be business focused, not feeling sorry-for-myself focused. As I said earlier, I am resilient but obviously not with this issue.

From a cognitive behavioural theory perspective, the match between a person's specific cognitive vulnerability (Sonya's belief 'I'm not good enough proving I'm a loser') and a current situation that reflects this belief (not getting a contract) is like a key fitting into a lock to open the door to emotional distress (Beck, 1987). A between-sessions assignment was for Sonya to write an account of how the belief developed. She said her upbringing was fraught. Her mother was always playing her off against her older sister to see who would win her approval. She described her first marriage as 'ghastly': 'No matter what I did for him, it was never good enough.' Up until her early thirties, she said her life was difficult to deal with until she remarried and found real happiness for the first time. This gave her the confidence to start her own business after working for two marketing firms. We agreed to focus on several areas linked to her cognitive vulnerability.

Making her self-worth conditional on whether she secured the contract

Sonya linked getting the contract to the approval she sought throughout her life. So she was seeking two contracts: one explicit, based on increasing her business; the other implicit, based on gaining approval to validate her self-worth. I explained the importance of distinguishing between not rating oneself and only rating aspects of oneself: 'So Sonya, your performance might be poor in a particular situation, but your worth as a person stays constant, you're unrateable.' She found this concept difficult to understand (many clients do) and wanted a visual way of trying to understand it. I produced a packet of peanuts (this technique is adapted from Wessler & Wessler, 1980).

Michael: This packet contains peanuts that taste great, horrible and just okay. Is the packet great, horrible or just okay based on its contents?

Sonya: It's just a packet.

Michael: Just say all the peanuts are horrible. Would that make the packet horrible?

Sonya: No, it's still only a packet.

Michael: If the peanuts were all great, would that make the packet great?

Sonya: It's still a packet. I sound like a parrot.

Michael: What about if I tipped out the peanuts and replaced them with diamonds, pebbles and bits of chocolate? What would you say now?

Sonya: Wonderful. Give me the packet!

Michael: Does the 'wonderful' refer to the packet or its contents?

Sonya: The contents, just the diamonds, and before you ask me, it's still just a packet. I know what you're getting at: I don't have to put myself down when things go against me.

The crucial point was for Sonya to focus on the contents of the packet (aspects of the self), not on the packet (self). Some aspects of the self change over time (replacing the peanuts with diamonds, pebbles and chocolate), so it's pointless to conclude that a single global rating such as 'I'm not good enough' captures her essence or identity. She could see the sense in learning self-acceptance and would keep a packet of peanuts on her desk at work to remind her of this crucial separation to make when evaluating events in her life: 'I don't want it anymore to be about the self-pitying ME.' She said that her colleagues would sometimes joke, 'Are you ever going to eat those peanuts or just keep staring at them?' Every day she went over in her mind the benefits of internalizing self-acceptance and her conviction in it deepened.

Michael: What's your way of explaining self-acceptance?

Sonya: The other day I was doodling on a pad and I wrote down my big dramatic ME. While staring at it, I suddenly saw that ME could stand for 'many elements to me' and the focus is on the elements, the E, not on [emphasizing] ME. Rate the elements, not myself.

Michael: How will you rate the element of a business setback?

Sonya: Not through what-a-hard-life-I've-had-and-I-deserve-to-be-rewarded victim thinking. I want to see it as unfortunate, part of business life, and hope to feel disappointed, not so upset by it. I've got a big test in the next several weeks: I want to step up my business by securing contracts with larger companies and now I've got my first opportunity.

Michael: Good luck.

A way to remind her in the moment of her new outlook when she started feeling irritable or her mood lowered was to pat the packet of peanuts she kept in her pocket whenever at business meetings, making presentations or contract negotiations. This patting provided a self-correction in her attention from internal (the stirrings of self-pity when things seemed to be going wrong and consequently beginning to lose interest in what was going on around her) to external (a non-distractible focus on developing her business). She wasn't successful every time she patted the peanuts in reorienting her attention but as I pointed out earlier, acting resiliently doesn't mean you have to win every struggle you're engaged in; but it's important to demonstrate you're engaging in helpful behaviour (assets) most of the time and non-resilient behaviour (liabilities) less of the time. Sonya judged her ratio between the two was 75% assets and 25% liabilities.

Sonya was pleased to hear that resilience involves acting non-resiliently at times which helped to broaden her understanding of the concept (she thought, like many do, 'You're supposed to always bounce back from bad times, aren't you?'). She later switched from the peanuts to wearing a blue brooch on the lapel of her jacket as a self-acceptance reminder. She also read a book on self-acceptance (Dryden, 1999), made notes on her reading which we discussed in the sessions.

Tackling her sense of entitlement

Sonya believed that she should win all the contracts not only because of the effort she put into preparing and giving presentations to companies but also as compensation for the hard life she experienced up to her early thirties. Would she say this to the executives she stood before? ‘Of course not. I know it’s ridiculous, but I will admit that sometimes when I know the presentation isn’t going well I feel like telling them sob stories so they will give it to me for sentimental reasons. I feel myself slipping from tough-minded to crumble-minded when that happens.’

She realized she was playing the role of a victim and wanted to change this and set herself a goal: ‘How do I want to be in my business dealings three or six months from now, if not sooner?’ For Sonya, her strategic thinking meant removing all surplus meaning (i.e. thinking like a victim) from contract negotiations or presentations and focusing only on what she needed to do to make the best business case for her company to be chosen and accepting, without self-condemnation, when it wasn’t.

Marked variations in her mood

Sonya’s moods were related to her conditional self-acceptance based on certain ‘If ... then’ assumptions she was holding but not clearly articulated before: ‘If ...’ is the premise from which a conclusion is drawn (then). Sonya’s mood variations were linked to the following assumptions: ‘If I get the contract then this means I’m a worthwhile person’ (excited and relieved) and ‘If I don’t get the contract, then this means I’m not good enough’ (angry and hurt). Both these unhelpful assumptions kept her psychologically trapped: the supposedly positive assumption only meant she was provisionally worthwhile until the next business setback and the negative assumption confirmed and reinforced her longstanding belief. Using the strategies discussed above, deepening self-acceptance thinking and weakening victim thinking, she was able to achieve much longer periods of mood stability.

Learning from failure

Sonya had really wanted to adopt the belief that there are things to learn about failure that lead to personal and professional development, but she wasn’t able to adopt it until she stopped personalizing failure. Kottler (2001) suggests the following benefits to be derived from failure.

- Promotes reflection on what you’re doing and how you could do it better.
- Stimulates change by discovering new problem-solving approaches.
- Provides feedback on what went wrong.
- Encourages flexibility to think beyond your current ways of doing things.
- Improves your frustration tolerance for dealing with situations that don’t turn out the way you expected.
- Teaches humility about the limitations of your knowledge and abilities, pricking the bubble of arrogant self-assurance.

Sonya had said in an earlier session that she wanted to ‘step up’ her business by securing contracts with bigger companies.

Michael: How did your presentation go?

Sonya: I didn’t get the contract but I felt both disappointed and exhilarated.

Michael: Can you explain?

Sonya: Obviously disappointed that I didn't get it but exhilarated that I didn't feel sorry for myself. I really didn't get into that failure and victim nonsense or brooding for days about it. That's the real victory. The feedback was that my presentation was excellent but the telling factor was my lack of experience in working with larger companies but they predicted I would eventually achieve my step-up goal [this prediction proved accurate]. Learning self-acceptance has really changed my thoughts, feelings and actions about how to react when things go against me in life, not just in business. I can respond resiliently now. I didn't know what to expect when I contacted you for some coaching, maybe you were going to give me a course in positive thinking or how to sharpen up my presentational skills. I certainly never considered it would be life changing. And [laughing] I'm not going to take this off [patting the blue brooch on her jacket lapel] because it acts as a constant reminder of what I learned in coaching.

Initially, six coaching sessions had been agreed but the final number was 25 spread over 8 months. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, developmental coaching is longer term because it 'takes a more holistic view involving the creation of personal reflective space; this might deal with more fundamental personal and professional development questions' (Whybrow & Henderson, 2007: 409).

As we've seen, Sonya's self-development had a positive effect on her professional development. It's important to say that the 25 sessions didn't always run smoothly: as eager as she was to learn everything she could about self-acceptance, there were other times when she was determined to convince me that her sense of entitlement—'If you throw everything into your work, then you should be rewarded for it!'—was justified because of the hardships she'd endured earlier in her life. Also, mood shifts were evident across the sessions: moving from cheerfulness when things were going well to despondency when she encountered setbacks and thought she was wasting her time and money ('Am I deceiving myself? Can I really learn this stuff? Do I really believe it?'). A follow-up session was agreed for 6 months to monitor her progress.

RE-CBC Isn't for Everyone and How It Can Be Improved for Others

One major reason why RE-CBC doesn't work for some clients is their reluctance or, at times, downright refusal to take responsibility for their thoughts, feelings and actions and, instead, blame the company culture or individuals within it. The usual response is 'If you worked there, which you don't, then you would feel the same way'. They talk as if their mind is a blank slate and the company inscribes its values and philosophy upon it thereby removing their freedom of thought about the company culture and how to respond to it.

Providing explanations that the human mind doesn't respond passively to events but is continually attaching meaning to them, and meaning changes over time (i.e.

your viewpoint alters) can fall on deaf ears. It's important for the coach not to get into a struggle over this issue by trying to make the client accept psychological responsibility; if she doesn't, he may believe he'll be diminished in some way in his own eyes as well as hers. Also, he will probably not realize that he is reinforcing her idea that she doesn't have freedom of thought in coaching either. If the client is not interested in RE-CBC, then bring it to an end instead of persisting unproductively.

Other clients might accept psychological responsibility but don't proceed to the next step of implementing an action plan for change or, if implemented, is done half-heartedly or haphazardly. They think that insight alone should be sufficient to promote change. Whatever term is used—acknowledgement, insight, understanding or awareness—relating to the crucial role our beliefs play in shaping our responses to events, it's not enough in itself to bring about change or, more precisely, deep and lasting change. Awareness of the thinking that lies behind an unproductive behaviour or unpleasant feeling appears to be the precursor to change, but several days or weeks later this awareness is not so motivating after all as the client reflects unenthusiastically on the effort required to change this behaviour or feeling.

If the client believes that insight alone will achieve his desired changes, this could be viewed as an experiment—leave coaching to see if it works; if it doesn't, he could return at a later date to restart the other kind of work he previously baulked at doing. If he does return, he needs to learn the vital importance of acting persistently and consistently in support of his productive beliefs if he hopes to realize the changes he wants.

With a few clients, it becomes evident that they have significant psychological problems which require the services of a therapist, not a coach e.g. depression with suicidal ideation though the initial presentation in coaching was a smiling 'I'm-looking-forward-to-working-with-you-and-achieving-good-things' approach.

With some clients, the emphasis is more on behaviour in RE-CBC as they find examining their thinking to be an intrusive, intimate, difficult, dull or unfamiliar activity, so they prefer to try-out different behaviours to achieve their desired outcomes. Others might see questioning specific beliefs as a kind of doubt virus that could spread through their entire belief system—a settled worldview becoming distinctly unsettled. With these clients, a few small experiments in specific areas could be conducted (as a prelude to examining more troubling beliefs) by going against an ingrained habit—'I always read my newspaper on the train to work'—to see if not doing it for a week starts tremors in her whole belief system.

In my experience, it's not usually the outright rejection of RE-CBC that's the problem but how it's presented and implemented. For example, I've supervised coaches where I've heard them say on DVRs (digital voice recordings) of sessions that 'It's all to do with your self-defeating thinking' thereby shutting down emotional expression by implying that it clutters up the coaching process, suggesting that problems are decontextualized (i.e. only created in your head and nothing to do with adverse circumstances) and creating the impression that RE-CBC is a dry-as-dust cerebral exchange of unhelpful ideas for helpful ones. Also, some coaches desperate to make a good impression, particularly on executives, convince themselves that they have to act as a fast-paced incisive questioner thereby shrinking the

client's reflective space to consider her responses. Allied to this fast-paced style, is having all the (well-rehearsed) answers to show how wise and experienced the coach is and the client's role in coaching is to be an appreciative audience of this wiseacre posturing.

Many difficulties in coaching can be minimised or avoided if the coach remembers to get frequent feedback from the client in order to make adjustments to the coaching journey and relationship. Often, assumptions made by the coach are not shared with the client thereby undermining the coach's claim that 'ideas need to be tested' and these untested assumptions can lead to wrong turnings being taken in coaching. A philosopher is supposed to assume nothing, question everything; coaches could also learn to stop assuming they know and find out.

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