Resource-oriented Analysis of Stress Situations

Purpose

Resource-oriented analysis of a stress situation serves to bring to light stress situations and stressors as they are experienced and perceived by the client both at work and within the private sphere. These stress factors are then ranked according to their subjective importance. At the same time however, situations are identified that are relaxing and energy-building, as well as resources located within the client and their surroundings. Individual situations are subsequently analysed in more detail.

Using this as a basis, goal clarifications follow, employing a questionnaire on goal clarification (stress management version) as well as planning for the development of an improvement of the stress situation (see guideline) which may be combined with changes in time- and self-management (see guideline) and self-calming and relaxation techniques (see guideline), possibly using bio- and neuro-feedback.

Brief Description

What is stress?

According to basic ergonomic principles, mental pressure of work is defined in the EN ISO Norm 6385 (see also EN ISO 10075) as „the entirety of external conditions and demands within the system of work that affect the physiological and mental state of a person“. The individual effect of the pressures on a person in combination with their characteristics are however described in DIN 33400 as demands of work. In everyday language, pressure of work is regarded as being a negative influence. According to this neutral definition, however, it can induce both negative and positive states (e.g. activation and learning). Analogue to this, stressors (influences that affect a person) and stress (or rather stress reactions as a short-term effect of stressors) are differentiated between. Selye (1950) regarded ‘stress’ as an adaptive reaction to both strong positive stimuli (Eustress) as well as negative stimuli (Distress). However since the observable positive and negative reactions have very different effects that can only partly be described using a common activation model, it has become customary in the literature to use the term ‘stress’ as it is employed in everyday language to describe reactions that are experienced as negative.

Lazarus (1966) showed that the stress reaction is influenced by how the individual evaluates the stressors or the stress situation and how they consider their coping competences or resources for dealing with the situation to be (Palmer & Cooper, 2007). Experiences of stress are therefore a result of the interaction or transaction between the situation and an individual person's perception and judgement of the situation. According to a person's individual assessment, loud techno music can be experienced either as stressful noise or as stimulating music. Time pressure can also result in different reactions depending on the evaluation or coping competency of the various people. It may be unbearable for one person, unpleasant for another, and a challenge for a third person.

It would however be over-hasty to conclude from this that stress is a „purely subjective phenomenon“. Anyone who experiences a high level of time pressure over months or even years without an opportunity to relax will probably have to reckon...
with a deterioration of their mental, physical or psychosomatic well-being as well as the state of their health. Possible consequences can, depending on the individual, take a milder form, for example irritability, high blood pressure or insomnia, but can also take the form of coronary heart disease or cardiac death, as longitudinal studies show. Concrete measurable costs include increased absence and health costs. It would appear that there is almost no impairment of well-being or illness that can not be proved to be negatively influenced by stress.

Negative consequences of stress are probable when all of the following characteristics of the definition of stress that have continued to be developed after Lazarus and are still valid today (Greif, 1991, p. 13) are present:

- The situation is experienced as a subjectively unpleasant state of tension,
  - is imminent (or has already taken place) and
  - continues over a long period of time
- It is feared that the state of tension is
  - not completely controllable,
  - however avoidance of it appears subjectively important.

Regarding theory-guided analysis of the stress situation of a client, the interview below was conducted with K in which K is questioned concerning the characteristics presented in this definition.

According to Siegrist's Effort-Reward-Imbalance-Model (1966), stress is caused by conditions that are unsettled as a result of high demands at work and limited long-term rewards for the effort invested (such as a lack of recognition or appreciation or job security). The person concerned permanently 'plunders' their personal resources, without being able to build them up again by means of compensatory measures. According to data collected by Siegrist (1966), this imbalance increases the risk of coronary heart disease.

**Stressors und resources**

When clients are asked what brings on a feeling of stress in them, they tend at first only to mention generally well-known stressors such as time pressure or overtime. Many are not aware that for example constant minor organisational irritations can be critical. It is useful as a basis for the interview on resource-oriented stress analysis to be aware of typical stressors. Semmer und Mohr (2001) discriminate between the following stressors and resources:

1. **Regulation Demands:**
   - Level of complexity is too high or too low (qualitatively too few or too many demands), high variability
   - Level of social demands is too high
   - Requirement to cooperate is too high

2. **Obstacles while carrying out tasks**
   - Intensity (time pressure, high concentration or uninterrupted attention)
   - Problems organising work
   - Interruptions/ distractions
   - Insecurity (unclear goals and feedback, goal conflicts)
   - Risk of accidents
3. **Physical Conditions**
   - Environmental conditions (noise etc.)
   - One-sided bodily strain (e.g. exclusive use of the right hand)

4. **Social Conditions**
   - Conflicts and other social stressors (e.g. behaviour of superiors that is perceived as unfair, or being allocated tasks for which someone else is actually „responsible“)
   - Pressure to cooperate (with persons experienced as unpleasant)

5. **Organisational conditions**
   - Low status, limited recognition or appreciation
   - Stressful company policy (e.g. information policy)
   - Limited control and influence
   - Unfavourable future prospects

Typical life stressors are described vividly by Palmer and Cooper (2007).

**Resource Orientation**

It is in the nature of the process that the analysis of feelings of stress and stress situations activates negative feelings and memories in the clients. Many clients have a recognisable need to describe their own stress situation in detail to their coach. In everyday working life this is not always possible because it can be interpreted as being a weakness in them. People don't want to ruin their friends' good mood by describing at length their stressful situation when they only seldom meet with them. For some, coaching is a better opportunity to talk openly and without reserve about their own stressful situation. When the client describes a difficult stress situation, it is first of all important to show him or her respect for having managed to bear the situation. The coach listens, structures by means of intermittent summaries, shows appreciation and emotional support, and encourages further reflection by means of competent questioning or introducing specialist knowledge.

However, in order that the analysis does not focus on negative aspects alone, it is to be recommended that resource orientation is taken into consideration in the stress analysis right from the start. In the question guidelines for stress analysis below, we therefore also ask about situations that are recuperative for the client and give him or her new energy, as well as about resources that he or she could use in order to reduce the stress experienced or make it easier to deal with. The following list with examples of coping strategies and resources serves as a background. A detailed overview of questions that analyse coping strategies and skills has been published by Palmer and Cooper (2007).

**Examples of coping strategies and resources are:**

Coping strategies
- Problem-related (focus: searching for solutions to problems)
- Emotion-related (focus: better control over feelings)
- Evaluation-oriented (focus: re-evaluation of stressors, e.g. time pressure as an interesting challenge)
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Personal Resources

- Expert knowledge
- Practical experience
- Ability to take strain and ability to rapidly self-calm
- Recuperative sleep at night
- Good state of health
- Belief in oneself, self-esteem
- Social competence
- Healthy diet
- Regular exercise (light sporting activities)

Environmental Resources

- Relaxation and recreational breaks allowed by the employer
- Scope for taking control, shaping, and taking action (as a stress buffer)
- Social support (superiors, colleagues, employees, friends, and family)
- Expertise of colleagues or external experts that can be asked for
- Knowledge systems (internet, intranet)

Particular Stressors for Managers

Managers are an important target group in coaching. Steinmetz (2006) describes approaches and concepts for promoting their health. Their decision latitude in their job and the design of job demands is in general larger than that of their employees as are their long-term chances of being rewarded for their efforts by means of recognition or promotion. As a result of this they have at their disposal important resources for reducing the negative effects of stressors. Stress reduction does not mean that stressors are removed completely. Steinmetz (2011) conducted investigations in which the following stressors could be observed for managers:

- High performance demands
- Complexity of tasks
- High level of work volume
- Time pressure
- Long working hours
- Interruptions of work
- Frequent business travel
- Dynamic tasks (unpredictable changes in tasks and plans)
- Social stressors
- Fear of being fired

Managers’ Resources:

- Competent employees
- Large amount of decision latitude
- Internal control belief („I can influence the stress situation positively!“)
- Active strategies for dealing with issues and coping
- Experiencing coherency
- Positive social relationships
**Change of conditions precedes change of behaviour**

Interventions can be distinguished according to whether they target changing the behaviour of a person (e.g. more effective coping competencies) or the conditions (working and living conditions such as permanent time pressure, inefficient work flow processes, uncertain changes in tasks, authoritarian leadership style, unfavourable climate in the organisation etc.). Most stress management concepts only target changes in the person and their behaviour, for example by means of relaxation exercises or development of coping strategies or skills. Even when the person can deal better with the stress situation, as a result this can nevertheless be problematic. When the person or their environment discovers that they can cope better with the strain, then they may be loaded down with more tasks. As a consequence, they will again suffer from stress. The situation may even be more critical than before, because the decision latitude has now become more restricted. This problematic cycle can only be broken by means of preventative shaping of the situation in a way that does not increase the level of stress. The improvement of conditions thus has higher priority than a change in behaviour (see the guideline on *Improvement of the Stress Situation*). Conditions and behaviour are related to each other and interdependent. In resource-oriented stress analysis, both the conditions and the behaviour of the client should be investigated and analysed.

Managers can use their decision latitude for both themselves and their employees in order to shape working conditions such that they and their employees can achieve an optimal level of performance while at the same time not putting their long-term health at stake. In the past few years, concepts for health-promoting leadership have been developed to this end (Franke, Vincent, & Felfe, 2011).

**Questionnaire Guideline for Stress Analysis**

The following theory-oriented questionnaire guideline is based on Lazarus' stress model (1966) and the principles of resource orientation and situation orientation described above, but was constructed, adapted, and tested in practice as simply as possible for the purposes of analysis within the coaching context. For further information and methods in stress management coaching, see Palmer (2008; Palmer & Dryden, 1994) and Greif (Greif, 2010, 2011), see also resource activation according to Storch and Krause (Storch, 2004; Storch & Krause, 2007), and for a collection of practical analysis methods see Palmer and Cooper (2007).

**1. Analysis of Stress- and Recovery Situations**

1) „Please describe which demands or situations at work or in your private life activate a feeling of stress in you. Which situations do you in contrast find relaxing or energy-building at work or in your private life?“

- Ask questions about each individual situation with respect and appreciation until they have been described concretely and have been understood by you as coach.
- Ask which catchwords or key terms could be used as headings for the situation and write them on small cards (ca 5x9 cm or 2x 3,5 inches). Stressors should be written on red cards, and relaxing, resource-generating situations on green cards, and then laid out on the table in front of the client.
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- Questions should alternate as much as possible between subjectively important stressors and resource-building situations. (‘important’ = having great influence on the client’s quality of life and mental/physical well-being from his or her own point of view.)

- Keep asking about further situations and resources until the client has described all stressors and resource-building situations that are important from her or his point of view.

2) Present a Checklist (see appendix), in order to add possible further stressors and resources. Transfer the most important of these onto red and green cards.

3) Ask the client to put the red and green cards in order of importance.
   - The green cards can then be glued in order of importance onto a page of paper, and the red ones onto another page.

2. Analysis of individual stress situations and factors causing stress as well as energizing situations and resources

4) Start with the most important red card and explain that probably only the subject of this card and that of the most important green card can be analysed in detail today.

4a) „How did you experience the stress situation and factors causing stress?“
   - „How stressful was that for you?“
   - „How often did this or a similar situation come about recently?“
   - How long is the stress likely to last? Can you see the ‘light at the end of the tunnel’ or is the stress never-ending?“

4b) „How important is it to avoid these stressful situations?“

4c) „How do you deal with the situation?“

4d) „To what extent can you influence the situation, or control or change it?“
   - „What have you already tried?“

4e) „Can you improve the situation with the help of other people?“

4f) „How much scope for action or influence do you have, in order to withstand the stress or to relieve it afterwards?“

5) Then continue with the most important green card.

5a) „How did you experience the positive situation or coping with the situation?“
   - „How pleasant and relaxing was it for you? Were you able to generate new energy?“
   - „How often did this or a similar situation come about recently?“

5b) „How important are these experiences for you?“

5c) „Can you describe in concrete terms how you behaved?“

5d) „Would it be possible to bring about such situations more often?“

5e) „Can other people support you in this?“

3. Subsequent clarification of goals and development of solutions

Goal clarification is a standard method in coaching and can be used here in order to clarify subsequent goals. As an alternative, the Questionnaire on Goal Clarification (Stress Management version) can be applied. The coach explains to the client that in the coaching session first of all only the two goals that are considered by the client to be the most important will be dealt with. The client can fill out the questionnaire at home and bring it to the next session. It is however then necessary to discuss the goals and estimations together and decide how realistic and achievable they are. If necessary, additions and corrections can be noted in the questionnaire.

The coach explains to the client that the filled-out questionnaire will be referred to again in future sessions in order to evaluate the interim status and maybe revise the
goals, and again at the end of the coaching for the final evaluation.

The questionnaire includes assessment of current goal achievement levels and further assessment scales. Of particular interest is the answer to the question „How long do you need in order to recover after the situation?“ (from „immediately“ to „more than a day“). The answer to this question can be understood as a robust assessment of stress intensity. When the estimated time necessary to calm down is reduced in the course of coaching then this is a clear indication of the reduction in stress intensity. – It makes sense to point out to the client the importance of this assessment scale (after they have filled out the questionnaire). This promotes introspection with regard to an important goal criterion.

The time that is necessary for the body in order to regain „normal“ adrenalin levels is described in the field as Unwinding (Frankenhaeuser & Johansson, 1986). The phase after work during which inner distance is achieved to work and work stress is called Detachment (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007).

Subsequent to goal clarification, possibilities for improving the stress situation are discussed together (see guideline).

Preview:

If the questionnaire is used again at a later point, the corrections and new assessments are filled in on the same form using a different coloured pen (with a note of the date on which the assessment took place).

– When progress is made, the coach and client analyse together with which resources the client achieved this, how realistic 100% goal achievement is, and what can be selected as a goal for the further improvement of the situation (see here the guideline improvement of the stress situation).

Expected Results

The result of the method is a list of stress factors and situations that are regarded by the client as subjectively important, as well as a parallel list of relaxing and energy-building situations and resources located within the client and the client's surroundings. The client's feelings and assessments with regard to individual situations are subsequently analysed in more detail.

Using the questionnaire on goal clarification, the client once again analyses for her or himself alone two important stress situations and defines her or his goals. The questionnaire includes assessments of current goal achievement and a simple measure of stress by means of the scale on recovery time needed. This questionnaire serves together with the stress analysis according to the guideline as a basis for later planning of the improvement of the stress situation (see guideline) - where necessary in combination with a change in time- and self-management (see guideline) as well as techniques for self-calming and relaxation (see guideline).

Since according to the underlying theoretical model and the studies presented here stress and its consequent effects on health are not based only on objectively observable stressors but rather at the same time always on the subjective perceptions and evaluations of the person concerned, it is assumed that the theory-guided questioning method is appropriate and constitutes a useful basis for planning for both the people concerned and the organisation in order to promote mental, somatic and psychosomatic health.
Open Questions and Problems

1. The State of Research regarding Method

The method of analysis is based on empirically supported theories and knowledge regarding stress in the workplace. However, in order to adapt them to the coaching setting, questions that are usually used in standardized methods for analyzing stress in the workplace and the private sphere were altered significantly and inserted into a qualitative interview format. The test criteria (objectivity, reliability and validity) that could be tested statistically have been checked only for the questionnaire scales and cannot be tested for single items in the interview with the coach.

In addition, the question remains open as to whether and how it can be proved empirically that interventions for improving stress situations that are useful in practice can be put into operation on the basis of standard questions that are used in questionnaires or interviews. On the basis of our own practical observations, it is nevertheless remarkable that the clients in general describe their stressors and stress situations in the course of the coaching very consistently, and assess the interventions in the coaching process relating to them as constitutive for important improvements. Such observations might be interpreted as indirect clues of retest-reliability and face validity. However, in later coaching sessions the clients often report new stress that affects their well-being. Therefore, stress management is not a task that can be brought to a close "once and for all". Stress management is like the flipside of a coin; it is the other face of high efficiency and for high performers seems to be a never-ending and lifelong challenge.

2. A Current Problem: Coaching for Burnout

The main symptom and defining feature of burnout, as defined in the ICD-10 catalogue (Z73.0) of mental disorders, is a state of emotional exhaustion and general loss of energy. It can result from permanent severe overwork and stress as a result of excessive demands on the performance capacity of individuals. In contrast to exhaustion after a single period of intensive work, burnout cannot be reduced simply by means of a break and a good night's sleep. Contrary to earlier theoretical assumptions, burnout is not only to be observed in employment in the social sphere but rather in all fields of employment (Burisch, 2010).

Burnout is experienced as the loss of one’s energy and in later stages ability to work. If it is not recognised and dealt with by the person concerned in the early stages, it is often associated at more extreme levels with depressive mood, which can even lead to suicide attempts. In contrast to depression according to the ICD-10 classification of mental disorders, burnout typically arises when the recovery necessary after extended periods of energy-draining stress situations is lacking. The emotional exhaustion here is caused by a chronic energy deficit (Küster & Wittenberg, 2202). In the case of later stages of burnout, the ability to recover is 'damaged'. It does not regenerate itself at the weekends or on holiday and even taking a short career break is not always sufficient in order to generate the energy necessary for a normal job. In such later stages, therapy is not easy. A qualified therapeutic programme with inpatient stays in hospital and assistance during the phase of rehabilitation are necessary, especially when burnout is accompanied by depression and the risk of suicide.

Clients hesitate before seeking treatment by doctors or psychologists with a psychotherapeutic education and prefer to consult a coach. There are coaches who offer 'burnout coaching', as can be seen in the Internet. No doubt coaches can work preventatively in the pre- and early stages of burnout and can also be involved at the
higher levels of burnout therapy in consultation with a qualified therapist. They can provide important support in the analysis and mastering of the stress situation at work and in the planning of active relaxation. Without a diagnostic and therapeutic training, however, they should only take on clients in the early stages of burnout and not those who have reached a stage of total exhaustion according to the ICD-10 catalogue (Z73.0). A cooperative consultation with an experienced psychotherapist is to be recommended in order that one does not do harm to the client as a result of inadequate diagnoses and interventions.

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References
Appendix: Checklists

**What stresses you?**
*Please underline only those points that are important for you or provide more appropriate formulations.*

1. **Demands:**
   - Complexity of tasks is too high or too low
   - Social demands are too high
   - Demands for cooperation are too high

2. **Obstacles to completing Tasks**
   - High level of time pressure
   - Constant alertness
   - Frequent irritation due to work-related organisational issues
   - Interruptions/ distractions (telephone, e-mail)
   - Unclear goals
   - Unclear feedback
   - Goal conflicts
   - Risk of accident

3. **Physical Conditions**
   - Environmental conditions (noise, heat etc.)
   - One-sided physical strain (e.g. use of the right hand only)

4. **Social Conditions**
   - Conflicts and other social stressors (e.g. aggressive behaviour of customers, bullying, strain-ing behaviour of superiors or allocation of tasks for which others are actually „responsible“ that are experienced as unfair)
   - Pressure to cooperate (with people experienced as unpleasant)

5. **Organisational Conditions**
   - Low status
   - Limited recognition or appreciation
   - Problematic company policy (e.g. permanent conflicts with the public media)
   - Limited control and influence
   - Unfavourable future prospects of the firm
   - Risk of losing one's job

**Which resources can you use in order to deal with the situation?**

**My personal resources**

- Expertise
- Practical experience
- Stress tolerance and rapid self-calming ability
- Recuperative sleep at night
- Good state of health
- Belief in oneself/ self-esteem and self-efficacy
- Social skills
- Healthy diet
- Regular exercise (light sporting activities etc.)

**Environmental resources at my disposal**

- Relaxation and recreational breaks offered by the employer
- General decision latitude, independent decision-making concerning how and when the tasks are done (stress buffer)
- Social support (superiors, colleagues, employees, friends, and family)
- Expertise of colleagues or consultable experts
- Knowledge systems (internet, intranet)
Goal Clarification Questionnaire
Stress Management Version (prior to coaching)

Name: __________________________ Name of Coach: ______________________ Date: __________________________

Information regarding the Questionnaire:
In this questionnaire concerning the goals of the coaching sessions we would like you to give two main goals that you would like to achieve in the course of the coaching process.

The evaluation will be conducted three times: once before, once during, and once at the end of the coaching process. You can therefore communicate to us, which goals you wanted to achieve at the beginning, whether the goals changed, to what extent the goals have in your estimation been achieved, and to what extent you are satisfied with their achievement.

Goal Questionnaire:
The following is concerned with your coaching goals as you are aiming to achieve them prior to the start of coaching. You can of course change them at a later point or during your conversations with the coach.

Please think of two situations that induce stress in you and which you would like to be able to cope with more effectively by means of better stress management. We will start with questions about the first stress situation.

S1.1 Please give a brief description of your stress situation and what it is that induces stress in you:
S. 1.2 Which thoughts and feelings does this induce in you?

S. 1.3 **How long** do you need in order to **calm down after the situation** (please mark the answer that comes closest)?

1. Immediately
2. In 5 minutes
3. In 10 minutes
4. In 30 minutes
5. In an hour
6. In a day
7. Longer than a day

Please **describe your main goal with regard to your stress management in this situation**. Please make sure that this goal is particularly important to you and that you want to achieve it in the course of the coaching.

First make a note of the goal, and then make the corresponding assessments.

**G 1.1** **My main goal with regard to stress management in this situation is:**
G 1.2 The following sub-goals are necessary in order to achieve this goal (that is, steps that you want to take along the way towards achieving the goal).

G 1.3 Now please judge how close you have come to achieving this goal so far. Please assess to what percent you have attained this goal at the present time and write down the percentage:

__________%

G 1.4 How satisfied are you today with what you have so far achieved for this goal:

1 I am not at all satisfied
2 I am somewhat satisfied
3 I am moderately satisfied
4 I am satisfied
5 I am very satisfied

Please now decide which of the statements (1-5) are most applicable with regard to your goal. Please put a cross in the box with the number of the answer alternative that is most applicable.

G 1.5 Concrete Steps
How concrete is this goal for me?

1 I can't envisage any concrete steps.
2 Particular steps occur to me, but I am still unclear as to how I can get started.
3 I do know how I should get started, but the entire future path is not yet clear to me.
4 I have some ideas for concrete steps and know to an extent what the whole process should look like.
5 I have a clear idea of the concrete steps that need to be taken and of the entire process of achieving the goal.
G 1.6 Difficulties of the goal and the chances of realising it

What in my judgement are the chances of achieving this goal?

1  very limited chances  (0-20%)
2  limited chances      (20-40%)
3  moderate chances    (40-60%)
4  good chances        (60-80%)
5  very good chances   (80-100%)

Now please describe an important second situation that induces stress in you and which you would like to be able to cope with more effectively by means of better stress management.

S 2.1 Please give a brief description of the second important situation and what it is that induces stress in you:

S 2.2 Which thoughts and feelings does this induce in you?
S. 2.3 **How long** do you need in order to **calm down again after the situation** (please mark the answer that comes closest)?

1. Immediately
2. In 5 minutes
3. In 10 minutes
4. In 30 minutes
5. In an hour
6. In a day
7. Longer than a day

Please describe **your main goal with regard to your stress management in this situation**. Please make sure that this goal is particularly important to you and that you want to achieve it in the course of the coaching.

First make a note of the goal, and then make the corresponding assessments.

**G 2.1 My main goal with regard to stress management in this situation is:**

G 2.2 The following sub-goals are necessary in order to achieve this goal (that is, steps that you want to take along the way towards attaining the goal).
G 2.3 Now please judge how close you have come to achieving this goal so far. Please assess to what percent you have attained this goal at the present time and write down the percentage:

_________%

G 2.4 How satisfied are you today with what you have so far achieved for this goal:

1. I am not at all satisfied
2. I am somewhat satisfied
3. I am moderately satisfied
4. I am satisfied
5. I am very satisfied

Please now decide which of the statements (1-5) are most applicable with regard to your goal. Please put a cross in the box with the number of the answer alternative that is most applicable.

G 2.5 Concrete Steps
How concrete is this goal for me?

1. I can't envisage any concrete steps.
2. Particular steps occur to me, but I am still unclear as to how I can get started.
3. I do know how I should get started, but the entire future path is not yet clear to me.
4. I have some ideas for concrete steps and know to an extent what the whole process should look like.
5. I have a clear idea of the concrete steps that need to be taken and of the entire process of achieving the goal.

G 2.6 Difficulties of the goal and the chances of realising it
What in my judgement are the chances of achieving this goal?

1. very limited chances (0-20%)
2. limited chances (20-40%)
3. moderate chances (40-60%)
4. good chances (60-80%)
5. very good chances (80-100%)
Improving the Stress Situation

Purpose

The method for improving the stress situation assists with working out solutions with the client during coaching with similar methods, which are common practice in coaching. This specific method includes particular suggestions for changing the stress situation and working conditions (condition- or situation-orientation) as well as for improving individual behaviour and the client's coping competence (behaviour-orientation). When the improvements that are developed in this way or by means of the general method for developing solutions are consistently put into practice it is to be expected that the client's feelings of stress are reduced and that both their feeling of well-being and their performance efficiency increase.

Brief description

The basis for developing solutions together is an evaluation of the resource-oriented stress analysis (see guideline) and the descriptions and assessment scales in the Questionnaire on Goal Clarification (Stress Management version). The answers to the questions concerning the client's resources in particular provide a starting point. As is explained in the guidelines for resource-oriented stress analysis with regard to the principle of situation- or condition-orientation, the reduction of stressors (changing the situation) has priority over the improvement of the client's individual coping competences (change in behaviour). The focus of attention is therefore directed first of all to the resources in the surroundings that were identified in the stress analysis and only after this to the client's individual resources. In the following, possible starting points for these two areas of use are illustrated with examples. They are intended to encourage the client and the coach to seek similar approaches to solutions. Finally, the methods and techniques described in general guidelines for developing solutions, which can of course also be used here and are referred to in conclusion.

1. Changing Stressors and the Work Situation

The first approach to developing solutions is to look for possibilities for breaking down the stressors (such as time pressure or constant organisational mishaps) or reducing their intensity. This can come about by means of systematic reorganisation of the use of situational resources (e.g. by delegating a part of the task to other employees or improving procedures so that stressful organisational problems come about less frequently). This approach to problem-solving can be described as a problem-related coping strategy according to Lazarus (1966). We will differentiate in the following between a reduction in stressors (1.1) and the reorganisation of situational resources (1.2). The latter will be described as 'stress buffers', because they have a moderating effect.

1.1 Reducing the Intensity of Stressors

The intensity of such typical stressors as time pressure and the amount of work or organisational problems is not generally very easy to reduce. Normally, clients spon-
taneously express the opinion that this is „completely impossible“ in their organisation and their current situation. It is as a rule particularly „impossible“ to take on new staff, in order to spread the work load over more pairs of shoulders. It is expected that this would increase staff costs, worsen the competitive situation of the firm or go beyond the financial framework that is stipulated for public administrations. It is however worthwhile conducting an exact cost analysis in the areas of stress and health. An intelligent, stress-related re-structuring of working tasks and processes, sometimes even involving at least the occasional hiring or re-allocation of staff, can lead to a considerable reduction in costs. Reduction of stress and an increase in productivity are by no means mutually exclusive, but rather can often be improved at the same time. I like to tell sceptical clients a story from my own experience in which this at first seemed impossible, but then actually became possible, with impressive results.

**Practical Example**

I received a real call for help as a management consultant from the head of personnel of a municipal authority. In the foreign residents' department the rate of sickness amongst the young staff had increased to over 30% and the fluctuation of 80% was so great that one could speak of the staff as fleeing from this unpopular department. Briefly summarized, (Greif, 2008), the results after a stress analysis were not only the consequence of the large increase at that time in immigrant families and asylum seekers, but rather also the result of the young employees who had only had a short training being very insecure and feeling overwhelmed. Over 4,000 individual regulations had to be kept in mind, with different regulations for different countries of origin. Every mistake could be taken to court and end up in the newspapers as a 'scandal'. Communication with the migrants was not easy because of their limited grasp of German, etc etc. Getting more staff in was prohibited because of the town's austerity plan. The simple plan of altering their telephone system so that they could be reached by the authorities but not constantly disturbed in their work by calls from immigrants was also at first rejected because it was not considered feasible.

This changed when I demonstrated to them by means of a calculation how much the high and ever increasing level of sick leave and fluctuation was costing them. It also became clear to them that they would no longer be able to keep within the legally binding deadlines for processing the paperwork if the situation continued to get worse. A swift short term solution was found for the period up to the planned reorganisation of the working processes, in that first of all a temporary employee was taken on, an experienced member of staff who was employed in the back office as a permanently available advisor for the inexperienced staff, and the telephone system was modified. The stress decreased. After subsequent process analyses, improvements in the organisation and processes were introduced. The sickness rate sank to below the average level and fluctuation was close to zero, plus, the level of customer satisfaction amongst the migrants improved (Greif, 2008). In the end, the town administration, the staff, and the migrants all profited, and costs could be reduced too.

Perhaps you also know of a good practical example which you can tell your sceptical clients about in order to motivate them to think seriously about what could be changed?

- Managers with large decision latitude have the necessary influence in order to be able to immediately reorganize their work in order to reduce stress and increase efficiency. It would be ideal if they would invite their employees to jointly attempt to reduce stress at work and increase efficiency.
- Staff can win over their colleagues and superiors for an initiative that pursues the goal of making the work in their area at the same time more efficient and less of a burden.
- In Time Management (see guideline) rules are discussed that have as their
goal the reduction of work volume and working times:
  o Delegation of tasks
  o Not always saying yes to additional tasks
  o Defining and limiting processing times for particular groups of tasks (for example a daily maximum of two hours for answering e-mails)
  o In order to save on additional start-up times tasks that have been started should be completed before the next is started
  o In the case of complex tasks interruptions in carrying them out should be minimized (e.g. re-routing telephone calls)
  o In order to reduce the risk of mistakes, which cost a lot of time to sort out afterwards, only one task should be carried out at a time

1.2 Stress Buffer
If the stressors can not be reduced, it is often possible to introduce stress buffers into the working routine that mitigate the impact of the stress. Starting points could be:

- Short breaks and short intervals should be consciously planned for on a daily basis in order to „fill up on energy”
- Extending the decision latitude: (the staff decide themselves in which order and how the tasks are to be carried out)
- After strenuous working periods, a change to a quieter working phase should be planned (there should be the perspective of “light at the end of the tunnel” at the end of a stressful working phase)
- Improvement of mutual social support (mutual collegial assistance in the case of problems and understanding)
- Health-promoting leadership (Franke, Vincent, & Felfe, 2011)

The effects of decision latitude, short breaks and social support in particular have been empirically supported to be effective as stress buffers or resources with a moderating influence (Semmer & Mohr, 2001).

In some cases it may at least not be possible during certain phases to reduce the stressors or introduce stress buffers. One important issue in stress management coaching is here to at least ensure that the stress does not increase. This means encouraging the clients to inform their superiors at an early stage about increasing reductions in efficiency and performance quality under time pressure and other mounting demands and pressures, and in the interests of the organisation look for possibilities for limiting this increase. The clients themselves are often jointly responsible and increase their stress by taking on additional tasks too willingly.

If measures for limiting the increase in pressure are introduced, then it is unproblematic for the clients when the emphasis of the coaching is placed on changing behaviour and improving coping competence. What is on the other hand critical is when the improvements only target behaviour and, because the client can then deal with more work, their workload is increased.

2. Changes in Behaviour and Coping Competences
As described above, stressful (working) conditions and subjective experience are closely linked. According to Lazarus’ Stress Model (1966), the evaluation of the situa-
tion and coping competence or resources of a person (Palmer & Cooper, 2007) are possible starting points for reducing the experience of stress and thus its negative after-effects.

- **Re-evaluating the Stress Situation:** If a client is able to judge the stressful situation as positive and as one which he or she can deal with successfully while being proud of their achievement, then it is to be expected that it is no longer experienced as stress. According to Lazarus (1966), this would be an evaluation-related coping strategy. In order to do this, the coach would attempt to work out together with the client which positive aspects the client could gain from the situation. The coach could then subsequently encourage him or her to focus on the positive interpretation of the situation and suppress the negative feelings. The processes of reinterpretation or reframing are used in a similar manner in systemic methods and are regarded as important interventions (Bandler & Grinder, 1985; Schlippe & Schweitzer, 1996, p. 177 ff.).
  - **Examples:** Working phases with a high level of stress in which a deadline must not be missed are not regarded as stress but rather as a sporting challenge for oneself and for the team. It is however important that the success is afterwards enjoyed together and that a quieter phase follows. – Long conversations with interesting conversational partners are not regarded as 'time-consuming' but rather as energising stimulation.

- **Relaxation and Self-Calming:** Relaxation techniques such as autogenic training or muscle relaxation (see the guideline on Relaxation and Self-Calming) belong to those methods that have prevailed in the course of many investigations and which bring about relaxation reactions and break down negative effects (Hamm, 2009). Yoga and other methods also belong in this group. It is expected that clients learn to calm themselves more efficiently during and after stress situations and thus become as a result not only calmer but also better able to perform. These techniques belong according to Lazarus (1966) to the emotion-related coping strategies. – Relaxation and breathing exercises supported by biofeedback (Lehrer 2007) can not only be used for self-calming, but also for the improvement of performance both in competitive sports (Lagos et al., 2011), as well as in memory and problem-solving tasks. Here, it is important that the client learns to stop negative thoughts before the exercise and think of something positive (see the guideline Relaxation and Self-Calming) while they are relaxing.

- **Changing the Weekly Schedule:** As explained in the guideline Time- and Self-management it makes sense to consciously include times in one's weekly schedule for hobbies, recuperation, health, and sport, as well as friends and family, which can provide relaxation and give energy. – If not much time is left over for recuperation:

  "Celebrate" the few situations in which you can recuperate in order to experience them more intensively!
• **More efficient work routines:** In order to reduce time pressure, it is useful to learn methods and techniques for more quickly processing those work tasks that frequently come up. If for instance someone has to read a lot, they should learn speed-reading techniques, and if someone has to constantly remember and reproduce new information they should learn to master memory techniques. With one client, I worked on developing principles for more efficient processing of complex damage assessments, which he hung on his computer screen. A leader can learn to run meetings more stringently in order to speed them up. I learned from the then-mayor of West Berlin, Klaus Schütz on the board of trustees of the Free University of Berlin how to speed up voting: „Against? - Abstention? - Unanimous!“, etc. etc.

• **Improving Concentration:** Concentration can be improved by means of neuro-feedback in order to reduce mistakes when performing complicated tasks.

• **Promoting recuperation behaviour after work:** Sonnentag (2003) investigated the effects of various recuperation activities after stress from work that help one to switch off, to distance oneself in one's thoughts from the stress situation, and to promote self-calming. The activities can be divided into groups: (1) *Detachment* (psychological distance to work, such as „I will forget about work“), (2) *Relaxation* („I use the time to relax“) (3) *Mastery Experiences* (experiences of success with activities after work, in which one can show what one is capable of, such as learning a new language or hobbies like mountain-eering) and (4) *Control during your free time* (being able to decide oneself what one does with one's free time). The coach can encourage the client to do one or more of these activities on a regular basis.

• **Restful sleep:** many stressed people sleep badly and brood on unsolved problems when they wake up in the night. However good sleep is particularly important for those people who have to cope with a lot of stress. There are many practical guides to sleeping well on the book market. Some techniques and references are included in the guideline *Relaxation and Self-calming*. When these simple techniques don't help, one should recommend to the client that he or she should go to a specialist who has a sleep lab and learn the crucial ability to sleep deeply once again with the help of medical-technical and therapeutic support. – In order to have a short but refreshing midday nap, one can nowadays learn the technique of *Powernapping* with special reclining furniture and acoustic stimulation (management consultants psyrecon, Wupper-tal).

**General Methods for Developing Solutions**

There are many general methods and techniques that are applicable for improving stress situations. Here only the titles of some groups will be listed for cross-reference purposes:

1. Attempts at Problem-solving so far: What attempts has the client already made to solve the problem?
2. Analysing positive exceptions (the search for individual exceptions or situations in which the stress was not at all or at least less severe or could be dealt with successfully).
3. Individual brainstorming other other creativity techniques
Follow-Up Steps after Developing Suggestions for Improving the Stress Situation

After suggestions for solutions have been developed they must be and combined to form plans of action or strategies. Afterwards a firm implementation intention (see guideline Telephone-Shadowing) and carry out the plans has to be agreed on. I urgently recommend supporting the consistent realisation of these plans by means of Telephone-Shadowing. In my experience, the clients almost always find it hard to put their firm intentions to act into practice when the current everyday stress is great!

Expected Results

The results that are to be expected can be summed up very easily: If, by using the method for improving the stress situation within the context of coaching, solutions can be found together with the client and consistently put into action, then the estimated time necessary for recuperation is reduced (questionnaire on goal clarification at the end of the series of coaching sessions), as well as well-being and performance efficiency increasing. These effects only last when the stressors do not increase and the client is not confronted with new stress situations.

Open Questions and Problems

1. Stress Research and Practice

Findings and methods can be collected from several areas of stress research. Research into stress and health is a wide and expanding field of which it is hard even for experts to get the full picture. Some investigations contradict others concerning stressors and interventions. The few investigations into stress management coaching that are available (Newnham-Kanas, Gorczynski, Morrow, & Irwin, 2009; Palmer & Cooper, 2007; Palmer & Dryden, 1994; Steinmetz, 2006) do not deliver consistently convincing results. As a long-serving occupational psychology stress researcher I suspect that this is the result of a lack of situation orientation. Steinmetz (2006) is the only person to combine her stress management coaching of managers with an analysis of working conditions and approaches towards improving them. Her results are very encouraging.

2. Stress Management as a Never-Ending Story

Stress management is, like time management, not a problem that can be „dealt with once and for all“ with a single seminar or course of coaching and the resultant changes in situation and behaviour. The environment and situation changes permanently at least a bit. We change. Altered stress situations and altered people change and create altered realities. Dealing with these endless changes makes experiencing stress and coping with it a never-ending story and lifelong challenge. It is exciting to deal with these changes in coaching and to develop and test innovative solutions together with the client.

Author: Siegfried Greif (English translation by Christina Handford)
References
Time Management

Purpose

The purpose of time management is to enable people to use their precious time more efficiently in order to achieve their personal and organisational goals and to manage the tasks in their everyday (working) life and hereby experience more satisfaction with themselves. In order not to waste time the clients learn to apply techniques, principles and rules of time management, based on practical experience.

Brief Description

Self-help Bestseller Books on Time Management

Time management is an absolutely classic subject for self-help bestseller books in all of the time-driven western countries (Harvard-Business-School-Publishing, 2005; MacKenzie, 1975). The German classic by Seiwert (2007) has been printed in more than 28 editions (see also Seiwert, 2009, 2010; Seiwert, Müller, & Labaek-Noeller, 2006). Generations of people under time pressure have spent a lot of time grouping their tasks according to priority (‘prioritising’), putting together weekly schedules, scrutinizing the time needed, and attempting to identify and fight „time-wasters“. Have they managed it? In the meantime popular authors like Seiwert (2005) do not only focus on efficiency, but also on more time for recreation, and on getting work, leisure, and family into balance and thus gain „more time for happiness“, thus being able to „live more healthily and successfully, and be more satisfied“. Is happiness therefore a matter of good time management planning?

Methods and Principles:

The following selection from Seiwert (2007, fold-out cover) compiles a list of the classical methods and principles of time management.

- **Eisenhower-Principle**: Tasks are classified according to urgency and importance into four groups. The important and urgent are to be dealt with first. Unimportant/not-urgent tasks are dropped and unimportant/urgent can be delegated. Tasks that are important/non- urgent get an end date.

- **ABC-Analysis**: Tasks are to be divided according to importance and urgency into three groups. A= urgent and important, B= important, but not urgent and C= neither important nor urgent tasks.

- **Pareto-Principle**: According to this principle 80% of tasks can be completed in 20% of the time that one has at one’s disposal, while the remaining 20% of tasks will consume 80% of the time. The idea of the approach is that the majority of time is invested in marginal tasks. Therefore it is important to save time investments in the marginal tasks!
• **Sawblade-Effect:** Up to 28% of performance is lost as a result of preparatory and re-familiarization time after interruptions in the working routine. Interruptions should be avoided during work on a task and tasks that have been started should be finished without interruption!

• **Salami-Tactic:** Large goals and tasks should be sliced up into small sub-elements and tasks!

• **A-L-P-E-N-Method:**
  (Aufgaben/ Tasks:) write down tasks and appointments
  (Länge / Length:) estimate how long they will take
  (Pufferzeit / Buffer time:) calculate in a time buffer for the unexpected
  (Entscheidungen / Decisions:) make decisions about what has priority etc.
  (Nachkontrolle / Follow-up check:) follow-up check if tasks have been completed

• **Silent Hour:** Reserve time for yourself and treat it like normal appointments! Make appointments with yourself and put them in your calender!

**Rules with which you can save time**
Seiwert (2007, fold-out cover, free translation) sums up 10 rules by means of which people should be able to gain „more time for what really matters“:

1. **Goals:** Use time like a bow and arrow: first take aim! Direct your own actions according to your own goals!“
2. **Prepare:** Plan the next day in the evening before – in writing. In the process, allow enough time for routine tasks but also for the unexpected.“
3. **Set Priorities:** Take on the important things first, and leave the unimportant things be. Beware of the tyranny of urgency!“
4. **Summarize:** Allocate similar tasks to the same block of time, for example telephone calls, dictations, post, and short meetings.“
5. **Simplify:** Divide up difficult tasks into small steps. Decide on the order and times at which to get them done in the process“
6. **Let others work for you:** Don't forget to delegate: What? Who? Why? By when? Do not be afraid to say no and fend off time-thieves.“
7. **Screen yourself off:** You don't always have to be available for everyone all the time. Make appointments with yourself and use these."
8. **Show consideration:** Regard putting things off, lateness, and going over time as taboo. Lay out goals and the time at which a meeting will end in advance.“
9. **Make telephone calls:** Ask what time would be suitable instead of interrupting. Make binding appointments for telephone calls and calls to be returned.“
10. **Enjoy your successes:** Perceive tasks that have been accomplished as a success! Reward yourself and others."

**Further Rules** (Palmer & Cooper, 2007, p. 103 and other authors):
11. Avoid automatically saying yes when someone asks you to take over tasks!
12. Avoid procrastination and examine the assumptions and errors in thinking that
lead to this behaviour!

13. In order to avoid mistakes, only deal with one task at a time!
14. Only look at important small tasks once (e.g. e-mails) and deal with them immediately (set time frames for these tasks so that they don't explode!).
15. Leave unimportant mails (which would take work to answer) to stew and delete them after half a year if this doesn't involve any disadvantages for you and your company.

The following three basic principles provide a simplified summary of the quintessence of time management.

Three Practical Basic Principles

1. Make a list of tasks and appointments, and group, prioritise, and deal with them swiftly! Revise the list regularly!
2. Set, keep, or adapt time windows and limits for dealing with tasks!
3. Plan in time on an everyday basis for relaxation and re-energizing as well as for health, family and friends!

Learning Self Management through the Application of Findings on Behaviour Modification

Time management principles came into being as a result of practical experience. In titles, 'time- and self-management' are spoken of together in order to emphasise that the individual is able to manage his or her time. There are however self-management methods that are based upon scientific findings from psychological research into behaviour modification, learning and motivation theory, and psychotherapy. They are not however concerned with the effective use of time, but rather with how people with deficits regarding the independent realisation of goals can learn to control their behaviour themselves. Sarafino (2010) can be referred to for a recent practice-oriented introduction.

Expected results

More effective use of the general resource time is to be expected as a result of applying the techniques and rules of time management, as well as more time for organisational and personally important goals.

Open Questions and Problems

An initial review of the state of research shows a main effect in terms of improved time monitoring (Claessens, van Eerde, Rutte, & Roe, 2007). However the review raises the question as to how these effects come about. According to psychological insights regarding the problems that people experience in managing their time, it would seem naive to think that it would simply suffice to explain to them all of the current techniques and principles and to expect that they would afterwards be put into practice by a large number of people without further ado. This can probably only be achieved by people who have a very high level of self-discipline, but who would then presumably have no need for self-help literature since they have already learnt similar principles and rules anyway. For people with problematic time management (in
their own perception and the eyes of their social environment), methods of behaviour modification taken from clinical psychology would perhaps be more effective (Klein, König, & Kleinmann, 2003). It would therefore be worthwhile combining the principles and rules of time management with psychological methods of behaviour modification (Sarafino, 2010) in order to promote self-management.

Some parents educate their children with such principles as „the sooner you do it, the sooner it’s over“ or other such sayings. Also the role modelling of the parents or other important reference persons with regard to getting tasks done, as well as by their feedback will influence the time management behaviour. Culture has a strong impact on time concepts and time management or time discipline. In some cultures rigid time targets would arouse reluctance and conflicts. Some of the rules mentioned above may not work in all cultures. It might be “typical” for Germany that best sellers from the time management literature have been sold in 23 editions…. I did not find such best sellers in English...

According to my own experience with time management seminars, generally binding principles and rules cannot be conveyed. In these seminars I was constantly concerned with attempting to adapt them to the preferences and habits of individual participants, who told me that they could not work like that. One strength of individual coaching is that it can afford to adapt techniques and rules to individual preferences and habits as well as peculiarities of the situation, work organisation and culture. What is decisive here is probably support for putting planned changes of behavioural habits into practice. The basics for this can be provided by the Rubicon model of motivation theory (Greif, 2011; Storch, 2004). A methodological introduction to this can be found in the guideline Telephone Shadowing.

Author: Siegfried Greif (English translation by Christina Handford)

References


Self-calming and Relaxation

**Purpose**

The methods for self-calming and relaxation are based on Resource-oriented Stress Analysis and Improvement of the Stress Situation (see guidelines). The method consists of two techniques: *thought stopping* and *relaxation*. Clients who tend to ruminate fruitlessly about unsolved problems can learn how to bring negative thought processes to a halt and replace their rumination with positive thoughts. The relaxation technique can be used during regular short rest periods that can be built into the weekly agenda as a personal regeneration break. A quick self-calming-technique can be applied in stress situations (at work or in the private sphere) in order to reduce both stress reactions in the situation and the risk of making mistakes, and to improve one's own performance.

**Brief description**

In the following material, techniques for stopping rumination and for self-calming and relaxation are described. This is followed by a demonstration of how a breathing and relaxation exercise can be supported by means of Biofeedback.

**Thought Stopping**

For the relaxation exercise it is necessary that the client is able to stop his or her negative thoughts and does not ruminate on stressful situations or unsolved problems during the exercise. Instead he or she should try to replace them by positive thoughts.

1. *Working with red cards during the coaching session and using green ones to get started.*

During the analysis of the stress situation (see guideline resource-oriented stress analysis) stress situations or stressors were noted on red cards whereas relaxing, energising and successful situations were noted on green cards. Before the following relaxation exercise is done, a start should already have been made with finding solutions to one or more of the stress situations (see guideline Improvement of the Stress Situation). As described in the guideline above, improvement of the situation has priority over the modification of behaviour. Only if the clients expect to be able to solve previously unsolvable problems and improve stress situations by means of the coaching process will they find it easier to put a stop to their rumination on these problems.

Many clients brood frequently on unsolved problems that cause them stress, or on their stressful life situation. This happens in particular when they wake at night or try to relax during the day. When their thoughts are going round in circles while they are half asleep it usually doesn't result in a concrete and sensible solution. (There are however some exceptions to this, where for example a particularly inspiring idea appears in a dream or while half asleep. In this case it is worth waking up completely and making a note of the idea so that it is not forgotten. In the morning one can then check whether the idea really was that good... If thinking the idea over can be put off...
until the morning, then strictly speaking one can then calmly go back to sleep...

It is similar during the day. Often, when one is trying to relax unsolved problems immediately come to mind. Relaxation is no longer possible, but one is not necessarily in the mood to think systematically and work out a solution to the problem. (If however you should happen to have a brilliant idea while in a relaxed state of mind, then it should be noted down immediately! Relaxation can be very conducive to creativity.)

(0) Exploring the Subjects of Brooding
Before the exercise starts, the subjects that the client is currently brooding over are gone into. Have these subjects been noted on the red cards (add where necessary)? When and for how long does the client ruminate? (Some don't have much time for this during the day... and do it at night instead.) Does anything worthwhile result from this, or do their thoughts go round in circles?

The aim of the exercise is to put a halt to circular thinking (at night or during the day) that does not produce any results. If the client does not tend to do this then this step can be curtailed and the following step can be left out.

(1) Mental Repositioning of the Subjects of Brooding (red cards) in the Coaching Situation
In the course of explaining that the subjects brooded on could be dealt with more effectively and with better results in the coaching session, the themes and stress situations on the red cards are „taken on“ demonstratively by the coach in a symbolic act. – „I am taking on board this subject along with the cards and in doing so am symbolically taking them over from you. Leave them here in the coaching session for us to deal with together and clearly separate yourself in your thoughts from these subjects. When you begin to brood on these subjects, then remember that we have agreed here by means of this symbolic handing over of the subjects that they will only be dealt with here in the coaching situation.” – This symbolic act is intended to support the client in being able to distance him- or herself from the subjects she or he broods on during the day or night or during the relaxation exercise.

(2) Using Green Cards and Positive Thoughts for Getting Started
The green cards are however passed over demonstratively to the client with the task of using them to get started with the relaxation task at home and to always think about one of the subjects on the green cards whenever he or she starts to brood on stress situations and negative thoughts.

The coach now asks the client to look at and call to mind one of the relaxing and energy-giving situations mentioned on one of the green cards.

(3) Stopping Negative Thoughts
The coach explains the thought-stopping technique described in the following. It includes two sub-techniques.

1. Saying „Stop“ to Yourself and Thinking about Positive Situations
Whenever the client notices that his or her thoughts are beginning to drift in a negative direction, he or she should say „Stop“ to him or herself, silently but energetically, in order to put a stop to these thoughts or to reduce the in-
tensity of the negative thoughts. He or she should instead think about a positive situation or individual strength (e.g. items on the green cards).

2. Counting „one-two“

If stopping the thought doesn't work well, the client should silently count „one-two, one-two, one-two, one-two, one-two, one-two, ...“ until the negative thought could be suppressed, at least a bit\(^1\). (This is particularly effective when waking at night, according to past experience, and better than „counting sheep“). Afterwards, the client should once again think about a positive situation.

Alternatively, a two-syllable and for them meaningless and emotionally neutral word can be created with the client (e.g. „wan-lee“, „nee-sa“) to be spoken by them.

Thought stopping alone does not always work. In some cases it can even lead to “thought-rebouncing” and a long-term increase in depressive ruminations (Leahy, 2010). As described above in the first step, we recommend it only after having started a problem-solving process in the coaching which the client expects to bring him or her a positive solution.

The principle behind the technique silently saying a neutral word is similar to a one-syllable Bija-Mantra that is silently recited and repeated in Hinduism while meditating in order to ‘empty the spirit’. „Om is a well-known example. The question presents itself as to whether meditation exercises would not constitute a more suitable alternative. Recently, mindfulness meditation has been getting a lot of resonance in coaching. It will be briefly described and discussed at the end of the guideline in the section on open questions and problems.

Relaxation

Relaxation is a „vital principle“(Hamm, 2009, p. 223). Every culture has methods for promoting relaxation, whether in the form of a warm bath, massages, going for a walk in beautiful surroundings, listening to music, dancing, or meditating. In contrast to everyday methods, professional methods are usually based on a (partially) standardized, qualitatively painstaking execution and empirical testing of psychological and physiological effects. Two classical methods can be mentioned here, that had already been developed in the 1920s: progressive muscle relaxation after Jacobson (1925) und autogenic training after Schultz (1928/1979). It has been well proven by psychological and physiological methods that both methods promote relaxation (Hamm, 2009).

During Jacobson’s (1925) progressive muscle technique the clients first of all practice tensing 16 muscle groups in their bodies successively while lying or sitting down, e.g.: „Make a tense fist with your right hand, tense it even more, and concentrate on the tension....“ and afterwards, to relax, „...and now relax your fist! Let it relax completely. Compare in your mind the feeling of tension with the feeling of being relaxed.“ Even stressed people learn to relax easily by means of the contrast between tension and relaxation. Bernstein et al. (1990) have published a commonly used set of instructions and standard exercises.

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\(^1\) This technique was recommended to me by my wife Dietlinde Greif, who had learned it at some point in her training as a psychotherapist. Unfortunately, we have so far not been able to locate the source.
In the coaching setting, it is recommendable to carry out the exercise while seated (or standing), since this is more typical for the working day of the clients and bears less resemblance to a „psychotherapeutic setting“. The relaxation effect is not compromised by this. (With some adaptation it can also be practised in a standing position for people who work standing up.)

During autogenic training after Schultz (1928/1979), exercises for the relaxation of various body parts are mainly carried out lying down. The familiar standard formulations originate from Schulz, such as „I am very calm.“ „My right arm is very heavy … my right arm is warm.“ „My heart is beating calmly and regularly.“

Hamm (2009, p 223) establishes that the old dispute between scholars who support muscle relaxation and those who support autogenic training is nowadays basically outdated. Both methods bring about a comparable and scientifically well confirmed physiological and psychological relaxation reaction. Having said that, this also applies to other methods such as meditative ones like yoga or transcendental meditation. If these meditation methods are passed on by associations together with their religious and spiritual roots and rules, then they serve the purposes not only of relaxation but also those of self-discovery. Since we are focussing only on relaxation methods here, we will not go into further detail. In the discussion at the end of the guideline, mindfulness meditation methods that are very popular today in the field of coaching will be gone into in more detail.

Hypnotherapeutic methods can equally be used for relaxation when they are combined with relaxation suggestions (Hamm, 2009, p 243 ff.). A responsible approach when using intensive suggestive methods however requires a basic qualification in psychotherapy and intensive specialist training (Wark, Bloom, Lynn, Rhue, & Kirsch, 2010). It is dangerous when used in practice by lay-people or after only a brief training period (Grünewald, 1991; Heinrich & Revenstorf, 1990; Peter & Revenstorf, 2001). We do not therefore recommend them as a general coaching method.

Sequence of relaxation exercises with progressive muscle relaxation
If the client has already learned a relaxation method in the past, then renewed training is often not necessary. It is sufficient to ask them to relax during the coaching session, and then to check whether and to what extent they have succeeded in this. The instructions are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Please prepare yourself for your relaxation and think of something positive that you have experienced („green cards“).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now try to relax your entire body.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loosen up every part of your body and relax.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relaxation exercises are the means by which the clients are to learn to relax at any time and under their own control in real stress situations („in vivo“). It is therefore not a matter of finding out whether the client can relax for a long time but rather whether he or she can relax quickly. If they are not successful, then the client has the following programme of exercises explained to her or him in order to learn this and develop a feeling for their own relaxation:
(1) Relaxation Exercise in the Coaching Session as an introduction (see the instructions in the appendix)

(2) Relaxation Exercises at Home (at least three to five times, with audio instructions, ideally spoken by the coach as in the introductory exercise and made available to the client as an audiofile for laptops, Smartphones or mp3-Players; implementation monitoring by means of telephone shadowing, see the guideline; if it doesn't work when they are on their own then it should be done several times during coaching sessions).

(3) Relaxation in job-related or private stress situations (when the client has learned to relax quickly using the self-instruction below, then he or she can practice deliberately implementing the technique in simpler and then later more difficult stress situations and try to relax at least partly; Accompaniment during implementation by means of telephone-shadowing, see guideline)

The consistent continued use of the exercises at home is a critical hurdle to success which is hard to overcome. Intensive stress situations or unexpected difficulties often hinder the individual in performing the exercises as planned. Based on modern research on motivation and volition, the probability of transferring an action plan into practice rises if the individual is stimulated to formulate a firm implementation intention of the planned action, defining when exactly he or she will definitely perform the action or in exactly which situation (Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer, Wieber, Myers, & McCrea, 2010; Greif, 2011). In the coaching session it is therefore important to support the client in formulating her or his definite intention precisely. Since unexpected difficulties often hinder the clients' planned performance, we strongly recommend accompanying the transfer of the implementation intentions into practice by means of very determined telephone-shadowing (see guideline and Greif, 2011). If one fails to do this, then in my experience the exercise runs aground in day to day life and the point at which the relaxation technique is used in practice for stress management is not reached.

The goal is for the client to learn to calm themselves down at least partly at (almost) any time with the following silent self-instruction:

I am calm and relaxed!
If necessary, supplement with: stopping negative thoughts, and with positive thoughts!

If the clients can calm and relax themselves at least partly in this manner, then they do not need to complete the entire exercise. They can relax at home for five to ten minutes (five minutes is not that short) and can let a positive situation, recent beautiful moments or small or large successes pass before their inner eye.

Many clients enjoy these relaxation periods at home and experience them as a regenerative improvement of their everyday quality of life. The coach should support them in incorporating these times into their weekly schedule and to continue with them on a regular basis. Ideally, the client will succeed in making a relaxing and energy-giving routine out of it.

What is however even more important is the following final step, which consists of using the relaxation technique in typical stress situations. The client should learn to control his or her stress reactions in everyday life by means of exercises in „real life“
(„in vivo”), as well as reduce stress-related mistakes (for example careless mistakes resulting from a lack of concentration due to unsolved problems) or unsuitable behaviour (e.g. outbreaks of anger towards employees). The client should further learn in this way to „unwind“ directly after stress, and improve his or her state of mental, somatic and psychosomatic well-being in the long term.

It is interesting to observe that the relaxation exercises are carried out by the clients more consistently at home (even without telephone shadowing), if they are combined with biofeedback. More on this below.

**Expected Results**

Many of those clients that tend to ruminate without result on unsolved problems or situation, after having started to solve these problems in a preceding coaching setting (see guideline *improvement of stress situations*) and are able to focus on positive thoughts (see step 1) can, when they learn to use the thought-stopping technique as presented in the coaching situation, then reduce the frequency of this rumination.

If the clients have learned how to relax and make regular use of this in relaxation exercises and short periods of self-calming in or after stress situations then their recovery rate after stress and their perceived quality of life experience results in a general improvement.

By applying the quick relaxation technique in everyday stress situations, the following results are generally to be expected:

1. Better conscious control of their own stress reactions on an everyday basis,
2. A reduction in stress-related mistakes (for example careless mistakes resulting from a lack of concentration due to unsolved problems) or inappropriate behaviour (e.g. outbreaks of anger towards employees)
3. Improvement of self-calming (‘unwinding’) after stress and
4. Improvement of his or her state of mental, somatic and psychosomatic well-being.

**Open Questions and Problems**

1. **It is not easy to stop brooding**

Some of my clients have told me at the beginning of their coaching period that they ruminate fruitlessly „almost every night“, and one even „in every spare minute“. The thought-stopping method helped most of them to drastically reduce the amount of brooding. The clients experience it as very liberating when they can stop the brooding and particularly when they can go to sleep more quickly and wake up the next day refreshed.

In one case, a refresher treatment was necessary when to the person's disappointment the thought-stopping method suddenly no longer worked in the night. Only after an additional stress analysis and development of a new solution could he once again rid himself of the new problems that had emerged. The example shows that problem solving that increases the hope of a solution, has priority mentally. It is a natural reaction, when unsolved problems and „day residues“ occupy us at night. In accordance with the finding that thought stopping techniques which do not work can even result in more depressive brooding (Leahy, 2010), we recommend the technique only after previous solution finding and in combination with relaxation, stimulation of positive...
thoughts and the counting or meditation technique.

In the case of a serious sleep disorder, however, the combined method only functions in simple cases of problems with getting back to sleep as a result of ruminating about unsolved concrete problems and stress situations. Sleep disorders can have many different causes and are in some cases symptoms of mental or somatic disorders and each needs specific diagnosis and therapeutic treatment (Müller & Paterok, 2010; Perlis, Aloia, & Kuhn, 2010). Investigations in a sleep lab are necessary in order to be able to diagnose them. Massive sleep disorders should be treated by psychological and medical therapists who have been specially trained in this area. Coaches who perform stress management coaching should be aware of the empirically proved therapy methods (Müller & Paterok, 2010; Perlis, Aloia, & Kuhn, 2010) and recognise when they have reached the limits of their profession and in which cases they should recommend specialized therapists with sleep labs to their clients.

2. Digression: mindfulness meditation or introvision as alternatives?

Promoting mindfulness

Attention and mindfulness exercises are currently very much of interest in psychotherapy and coaching as an alternative to the methods described above. These meditation exercises have buddhist roots. The classic exercise consists of quietly and concentratedly focussing only on one's own breathing for 5 to 10 minutes, and avoiding all distracting thoughts and perceptions. As a result of these and other meditation exercises, the ability to observe one's environment or oneself quietly and attentively should be promoted as well as the ability to cope with stress, satisfaction with life, and general well-being being improved (Spence, Cavanagh, & Grant, 2008). It is expected that the client will be better able to observe him- or herself and gain some distance to him- or herself and his or her everyday problems through contemplative, non-result-oriented but attentive self-observation. It is in particularly thought to be possible to gain a kind of emotional shielding from stress situations by means of this method. The pressure to act or to feel that one should act subsides.

Mindfulness exercises have been used increasingly in psychotherapy (Pössel & Hautzinger, 2009) and in the past few years increasingly in coaching as well. Spence, Cavanagh and Grant (2008) have examined the effectiveness of a combination of attentiveness training and mindfulness meditation in the coaching setting. In the case of the attentiveness exercises, the participants each had to concentrate for five minutes on the conscious perception of various standard noises taken from everyday life. For the mindfulness meditation, they were each to focus for ten minutes on their breathing as well as on negative thoughts and feelings. The exercises were in combination with either a seminar or an individual coaching session (over a period of altogether eight weeks). The short period of coaching was conducted in two sessions on the phone. As the authors established, the level of goal attainment after attentiveness and mindfulness exercises was higher with coaching than with the seminar.

Introvision

A method that is related in some of its facets is the method of introvision, which was developed by Wagner (2007). It is based on psychological theory. This complex method is used to analyse unpleasant feelings and thoughts systematically. The goal is to resolve inner conflicts and promote inner calmness. Similar to the situation in attentiveness training, four exercises for promoting accepting alert perception are conducted at the beginning. „Accepting“ means that one does not attempt to prob-
lematize that which is perceived, but rather that the perceptions are just taken „as they are“. One concentrates only on one's impressions and perceptions and feels one's way into oneself by means of observation.

This is then followed by a so-called introvision consultation. First the imperative ideas that are connected to a stress situation, for example, are analysed („What is it that, in terms of feelings, is not allowable in this situation?“). One example would be the „must“ statement „I must not let myself be put under so much pressure by X's behaviour“. The sub-cognitions associated are then additionally explored and accepted (Example: „It could be the case that I let myself be put under pressure by X in the future.“) Afterwards, the clients are to focus their observation on the centre of what is unpleasant. It is important that this takes place in a purely „accepting“ manner. The search for practical solutions to the problem should be „put off“ until later. The introvision consultation is then followed by an evaluative conversation in which the clients are to describe what happened after the exercises.

**Radical Thought- or Emotional Orientation?**

When mindfulness meditation and introvision are used alone or in combination with other methods for reducing stressors, then they are to be understood as purely behaviour-oriented methods. Fundamentally, their approach is in fact even narrower, since they primarily tackle only the thoughts and emotions of the clients. They could therefore be described as radically thought- and emotion-oriented interventions, which are consciously not result-oriented. Are these methods completely incompatible with the result-oriented type of coaching put forward by our approach?

When looked at more closely, Wagner (2007) does not however by any means go against results that lead to a change in the interaction of a person with their environment with her introvision method. In fact quite the opposite: she expects that her method will contribute to breaking down conflicts between people. Also, Spencer et al. (2008) certainly want to get results with their mindfulness meditation, primarily those that concern improvements in attentive perception and individual health and wellbeing. Seen this way, it would be a question that should be decided empirically by means of scientific research and practical evidence as to whether these methods, which in their application deliberately avoid a short-term orientation towards results (because they would not be helpful according to the assumptions that form the basis of meditation) in the end lead to similar results to those methods used commonly in psychotherapy that have been described in this guide. If mindfulness exercises or introversion lead to better results and additionally promote a generally relaxed state and ability to solve problems calmly, then these methods should certainly be included in our collection of result-oriented methods.

It appears however very problematic to me when no analysis of the situation is made during stress management coaching and when at the same time no attempt is made to change the situation and to activate all the client's resources, or reduce or at least create a buffer for his or her external stressors. I can not imagine that our clients are well-advised to simply come to terms with their situation purely by means of contemplation. In my view, this method should be applied in combination with the development of solutions for the problems behind the ruminating on unsolved problems and stress situations – was explained for using the thought stopping method alone. Keeping this in mind, in my view they are a very valuable additional concepts for the improvement of quality of life by means of an intensifying of conscious (self-)perception and inner calmness. If some coaches today are enthusiastic about individual-
centered esoteric methods, then I see in this a very problematic tendency to retreat from social responsibility into the limited private world of the individual.

3. Breathing and Relaxation Exercise with Biofeedback

People who are severely stressed have difficulty practicing regular relaxation exercises. After initial euphoria, they then give up quickly after exercises in the coaching situation or seminars. Every day stress takes over and hinders the building up of energy needed to start performing the exercises. The stronger and longer the stress experiences, the lower is the probability of maintaining the firm implementation intention. Even when using telephone shadowing (see guideline) it is not easy to motivate the client to put these exercises into practice. The clients often experience motivational slumps that are hard to overcome, or new stress situations and changes in priorities supersede the good intentions. Those people, therefore, who basically need the exercises and relaxation techniques most, do not apply them as a result of stress. The well-intended exercises need more starting energy than a couple of glasses of alcohol, reading the paper, watching TV or simply collapsing into a chair, which provide immediate relaxation without effort. The reasons why people prefer such relaxing activities that become risky if you use them too much, are understandable psychologically. This is reminiscent of a vicious circle from which some can apparently not escape. It would therefore appear that something further must happen in order that clients can motivate themselves to do the relaxation exercises despite the aftereffects of stress, something that can be grasped concretely and has immediate results.

According to my observations, biofeedback techniques (Lehrer, 2007) with which clients can train on their laptops or PCs at home are very well suited. One example is Heart-Rate-Varability(HRV)-biofeedback, which is nowadays highly sophisticated and affordable: this provides feedback on heart rate variability or sinus arrhythmia, a stress-related value based on changes in the heart rate curve when breathing in and out.

Our clients who are pilots in our study of stress management with biofeedback were all very enthusiastic when they tried out the user-friendly technical systems and practiced with amazing regularity. So far it has only been rather hard work keeping one apathetic pilot client with a strong burnout on target by means of telephone shadowing. He was in psychotherapeutic treatment with a burnout diagnosis, and participated, by agreement with the therapist, in our stress management coaching study with HRV-biofeedback. A very busy business manager who had previously barely put the exercises above into practice willingly conducted breathing and relaxation exercises with it until now for nine months, for 5 days nearly each week (and does not stop to end it). Another client who after a hard day's work is at home once again put under pressure in his family by difficult foster children consistently introduced and maintained, despite the family, a recovery period after work almost every day, in which he was undisturbed and which he said improved the quality of his life. It is an advantage that one is „not to be disturbed“ while doing the exercise...

Numbers-oriented managers, engineers or economists seem to be especially motivated by the numerical feedback provided by the biofeedback. They know their current feedback measure values, set themselves ambitious goals, and are very occupied by the occasional drop in these values. The technology is thus clearly very compatible with number-oriented clients. I'm eager to know whether these advantages that have been observed with our first pilot clients can be confirmed by results
from a larger and broader sample.

Author: Siegfried Greif (English translation by Christina Handford)

References
Appendix: Instructions for Muscle Relaxation

The following instructions use Jacobson's (Bernstein et al., 1990) and Schultz' (1979) formulations regarding feelings of heaviness and warmth. I have taken the formulations over from my wife Dietlinde Greif, who is a psychological psychotherapist with a lot of experience in the method.

Before starting the exercise, ask the client whether she or he often feels tension in their limbs or areas of the body and whether it would be better during this tensing and relaxing exercise to leave them out or only tense them slightly.

The instructions are given slowly, with a calming „warm“ voice. Pause briefly (1-6 seconds) after each sentence and in the places marked with […] pause for 8-10 seconds (count silently to 10) when the tensing is taking place. Pause for 15 to 20 seconds (count silently until 20) at the intervals marked with […] during the relaxation phases.

Please seat yourself as comfortably as possible. Rest your arms loosely on the arms of the chair or beside you. You may if you wish close your eyes.

Prepare yourself for your relaxation and think of a positive situation, for example one of the ones that we have written down on the green cards.

We will start with the right hand.
Make your right hand into a fist. Now tense it.
Pay attention to the tension! […]

And now let the right hand go completely loose. All the muscles in your right hand are relaxing Your right hand is now relaxed. (…)

And now your hand is also getting heavy..., very heavy..., even heavier. ... ...

Now warmth is spreading out in your right hand. ... ...
Your right hand is getting very warm. Your right hand is now also warm. ... ...
It is relaxed, heavy and warm and can stay like that. ... ...

And now we will go over to your left hand.
Make a fist with it. Tense the fist.
Pay attention to the tension! […]

And now let it go completely loose again. All of the muscles in your left hand are relaxing. ... ...
Your left hand is now relaxed. (…)

Your left hand is now getting heavy, ... very heavy.
Your left hand is now heavy as well. ... ...
Now warmth is spreading out in your left hand. ... ...
Your left hand is now very warm.
Your left hand is now relaxed, heavy and warm and can stay like that. (...)

And now we will go over to your right arm. Bend your right arm once. Tense it, as if you wanted to feel your biceps. [...]  
And relax it again. The muscles of your right arm are relaxing again. Let them go completely loose. (...)
Your right arm is now relaxed. (...)

And now your right arm is also getting heavy..., very heavy..., even heavier. ... ...
Your right arm is now heavy. ... ...

And now warmth is spreading out in your right arm, right up to the fingertips. ... ...
Your right arm is now warm. ... ...
Your right arm is now relaxed, heavy and warm. It feels pleasant. And it can stay like that. ... ...

We will now go over to the left arm.
Bend your arm once and tense it. Pay attention again to the tension. [...] 
And relax it again. All the muscles are relaxing. Let them loosen up ... ...
Your left arm is now relaxed. (...)

And it is getting heavy now. Very heavy. ... ...
Your left arm is very heavy. ... ...

And now warmth is spreading out in your left arm, right up to the fingertips. ... ...
Your left arm is now relaxed, heavy and warm, and it can stay like that. ... ...

And now we will go over to your face. Wrinkle up your forehead and keep the tension in your forehead and scalp. [...] 
And now let it go loose again. Your forehead and scalp are relaxing. 
Pay attention to your scalp. If possible, relax the scalp as well. (...) 
Forehead and scalp are now completely relaxed. ... ...

And now coolness is spreading across your forehead. (...) 
Your forehead is now cool. ... ...

Now press your eyelids together. [...] 
And relax them again. Your eyelids are relaxing. ... ...
Your eyes and eyelids are now relaxed. (...)

Now press your tongue against the roof of your mouth and feel the tension in your mouth. [...]
And let it relax again. (…)
Your tongue is now completely relaxed. … …

Now try to let the cheek muscles relax completely. … …

Now press your lips together firmly. […]
And loosen them again. Your lips are relaxing. … …
Iyour lips are now completely relaxed. (…)

Your whole face is relaxed. … …
And it can stay that way. … …

We are now going over to the body. Pull your shoulders upwards and keep them tensed. […]
And now let your shoulders relax again. … …
Shoulder and back muscles are relaxing. (…)
Your shoulders and your whole back are relaxed. … …

And warmth is spreading out across your shoulders and your whole back. … …

And now breath in deeply once and hold your breath for a moment. Pay attention to the tension in your chest. [only 5 seconds…]
And breath out again. While you are breathing out, your chest relaxes.
Pay attention a few times to the relaxation when you are breathing out. (…)(…)

Now pay attention to your solar plexus. That is the place where your ribs meet above the stomach. The solar plexus is now being flooded with warmth. This feels pleasant. (…)
Your solar plexus is very warm. … …

And now pull in your stomach briefly and hold it there. […]
And let it go again. It is important to let your stomach relax completely. (…)
Your stomach is now completely relaxed. … …

And now let your abdominal wall go as loose as possible. And the abdominal wall is now relaxing. (…)
Your abdominal wall is now relaxed. … …

Now press your right leg against the floor or the mat. Pay attention to the tension. […]
And let it go again. All the muscles of your right leg are now relaxing, right down to the toes. (…)
Your right leg is relaxed. … …
### Self-calming and Relaxation

And it is getting heavy, very heavy. ... ...
Your right leg is now heavy as well. ... ...

And now warmth is spreading out in your right leg, right down into the foot and the toes. ... ...
Your right leg is now warm. It is relaxed, heavy, and warm. And it can stay like that. ... ...

Now press your left leg against the floor or the mat. Pay attention again to the tension. [...] And now let go again completely. Your left leg is now relaxing right down to the toes. (...) Your left leg is now relaxed. ... ...

And now it is getting heavy, very heavy. ... ...
Your left leg is heavy. ... ...

And now the warmth is spreading out through your whole left leg, right down into the toes. ... ...
Your left leg is now also warm. It is relaxed, heavy, and warm. ... ...

Your whole body is relaxed. It feels pleasant. And when you are relaxed, good thoughts come to mind. You remember a nice or successful situation or add up what you have done well recently. And so you stay relaxed for a little while and think of positive things. (…) (…) (…) (…)

And when you feel like it, come back into this room. You are wide awake and feel refreshed!

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If the exercise is done lying down, some clients fall asleep in the process. My wife takes this as a sign of successful relaxation and lets them sleep for ten minutes, particularly the clients that are „really worn out“ and if there is no other subject to be dealt with that is more pressing. In the following exercises, it should be agreed in advance whether, or for how long the coach should allow the nap to continue.

When the clients have developed a feeling for relaxation, they should practice summoning up the state of relaxation with a short silent instruction to themselves, which they can then use in a stress situation:

| I am completely calm and relaxed! |
Purpose

Telephone-Shadowing (TS) is a technique that supports the coachee to transfer his or her action intentions into practice. Its goal is to help the coachee to overcome inner or external barriers against planned changes of her or his behaviour. It is expected to activate his or her self-motivation and volition strength in a concrete situation. Practical observations show that the first trials to perform new behaviour often fail and demotivate the coachee. TS helps to remotivate the coachee to try again or to optimize the planned behaviour, taking into consideration the specific context situation. The technique is also useful for changing strong habits or developing new behavior and routines under difficult conditions (e.g. high stress at work).

Brief Description

Originally ‘shadowing’ means to follow and observe someone secretly. Applied to the facilitation of transfer of action intentions by coaching it stands for an accompaniment of the coachee by the coach in the transfer situation. For example if the coachee intends in a presentation of an important message to the members of his organization to speak more slowly, firm and convincing than before, the coach may participate in the audience and observe the behavior. Afterwards, in a meeting, coachee and coach exchange their observations and evaluate the results. If the intended behaviour change had not been achieved, the coach may encourage a retry, engage a specific training or if necessary, facilitate the development of a more realistic short-term action intention.

Telephone-Shadowing (TS) is a simple and efficient alternative, where observation in the real situation would be very time consuming or not recommendable. Here the coach accompanies the coachee directly before and/or after the situation by telephone (Greif, 2008, 2011). A necessary precondition is that the coachee is able to describe his or her behaviour and the context situation adequately and has formed a clear goal and a strong and concrete implementation intention of his or her planned actions (Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer, Wieber, Myers, & McCrea, 2010). The use of TS is recommendable only, if the coachee is able to monitor his own behavior and situational constraints realistically.

Steps:

1. Planning the time or situation, when the coachee wants to perform the behaviour: „When do you exactly plan to implement the intended action? Supplementary question: “On which day and at what time?” or “As a reaction in which situation?”
2. Form a firm implementation intention: „Please form a firm action implementation intention, either about the exact time when to perform the action or in the form: ‘If X happens, then I will do Y.'” (Examples: “I will start to work on the problem, as planned, tomorrow 9'o clock.” Or “If I start to get angry, I will breathe deeply and calm myself before I react.”)
3. Explain the purpose and procedure of TS and obtain consent to try it.
4. Make telephone appointments: Appointments can be made either before and/or after the situation, where the coachee intends to show his or her new behavior. Normally it is effective to arrange a call after the situation, temporally
as close as possible. If the avoidance tendency or anxiety of the coachee is high, it is useful to make additional appointments before the critical situation.

5. TS session: In the telephone session the coachee reports if it was possible to perform the intended actions and if the consequences were as expected. The coach asks the coachee to describe the processes in detail, how he or she felt and how the environment reacted. If it seemed impossible perform the intended actions, the coachee and coach explore possible internal barriers and external barriers, e.g.
   a. Not remembering the intention in the moment
   b. Urge to do something else
   c. Distracting thoughts or unexpected behaviour in the environment
   d. Not enough time to try the behaviour, superposition of the intention by emotions such as stress or anger
   e. Sudden thoughts or fear, that the planned action may be inappropriate or negative reactions
   f. Discouraging feedback by other people before and in the situation
Together coachee and coach analyze the resources of the coachee, which he or she could use to overcome the barriers or how to live with them (see guideline “resource oriented problem analysis). Encourage and remotivate the coachee to try again in a different way or to reformulate the goal and action intention.

6. Frequency of TS sessions: Often only two to four short TS calls are necessary in order to achieve desired results. Later shadowing by Email may be efficient too. In difficult cases extra face-to-face coaching sessions and/or additional calls are recommended before the situation in order to strengthen the motivation and volition. To change strong habits, persistent calls are necessary and small stepwise changes with supportive feedback, until the desired results are reached.

7. Fade out and self-activation: If the desired results have been reached, the coach and coachee analyze, how the coachee (and not “the coach” or “the calls”) activated his or her resources in the situation. The coachee is encouraged to self-activate the resources in the future without the coach and to transfer the lessons learned to other situations.

Principles:

1. It is advisable to formulate the offering of TS outright. Long justifications or explanations make it more difficult for the coachee to agree.
2. If the coachee is concerned because he or she feels controlled by TS, do not deny that this is a kind of external control, but emphasize that he or she defines the goals and always is able stopping it. Mention, that the method can rise his or her self-regulation, according to practical experience.
3. Over time it is important to lengthen the distances between the calls, to fade out the intervention and to empower the coachee to self-activate his new volition strengths.

Expected results

Where it is applicable, TS is expected to improve the volition strengths of the coachee in spite of internal or external barriers. The coachee is able to reach desired concrete results. Therefore, it is a core technique of result-oriented coaching. Also, through the technique the coach develops much more insights about internal and
external barriers or facilitating conditions. He or she can help the coachee to develop his or her self-motivation skills and persistency following difficult goals. The coachees are proud of their success and the newly acquired skills.

Open questions and problems

1. The TS method is only applicable to intended concrete changes of the behaviour or actions of the clients. If the intended changes are defined vaguely or if they embrace a broad field of behaviours, it would be better to apply a less structured concept of telephone coaching and not to focus on concrete behaviour and interactions in the transfer situation.

2. The probability of success of the method seems to be lower, if the intrinsic motivation, persistency or skills of the coachee to perform the intended behavior in general are low or if a powerful social environment resists to the changes or if the transfer climate of the organization is bad. Here prior to planning behavior change, goals should be defined, which the coachee is able to attain. Also, initiatives to change the context conditions might be more fruitful, than to try actions without sufficient probability of success.

3. If the general intrinsic motivation and volition of the coachee trying the behavior is low or if necessary time management skills are missing, it is necessary to work on these, before TS can be uses as an adequate intervention.

4. If the coachee shows strong feelings of reactance (very seldom) or feels controlled by the calls, he or she should be encouraged to decide stopping it and to try a different intervention.

5. Some coachees may develop dependency of the coach and even might try to “delegate” their motivation and volition to the coach. Therefore it is absolutely necessary always to fade out the intervention correctly and to train the coachee how to use it independently.

Author: Siegfried Greif

References


