

# choice

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*From TRIAGE to*  
**RECOVERY**

Coaching through COVID-19

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# *From TRIAGE to RECOVERY*



## **Coaching through COVID-19**

COVID-19 is presenting coaches and their clients with significant challenges. How does coaching offer a solution to the world's 'new normal'? What is the impact of COVID-19 on our clients' ability to perform? How can we help clients recover after a major crisis? How can we coach teams from chaos to health? How can you reinvent your coaching practice? Join us as we explore how coaches can help their clients get ahead of the curve.

# Flourishing FORWARD

Considerations for trauma-informed coaching

By Megan Gilmore, MA, LSCC, CPCC, PCC



**A**s coaches, it is our joy to partner with our clients toward co-creating new insight and practicing new habits that align with their goals. This way of moving toward fulfillment and flourishing together is transformative. But at this point in history, it will be incredibly difficult to achieve our objective as coaches without understanding

and carrying a deep compassion for the traumas that both we and our clients bring to a coaching relationship.

The events impacting human lives across the globe in the first half of 2020 have been vast, pervasive and impossible to ignore. In his book, *My Grandmother's Hands*, Resmaa Menakem says, "When something happens to the body that is too much, too fast, or too soon,

it overwhelms the body and can create trauma." Collectively, we are experiencing states of overwhelm, depletion, unpredictability and threats to our sense of safety that are unprecedented.

On top of the many collective experiences over the last few months, many of us also experience intermittent, repeated or sustained individual traumas due to race, gender, socioeconomic status,

ability or additional Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). These intersecting and overlapping factors have a profound and complex impact on our well-being and our ability to flourish as humans. Adjusting our coaching practices to include evidence-based interventions that increase wellbeing and decrease the negative impacts of trauma is essential to our effectiveness as coaches.

While it is not within our scope of practice as coaches to fix or heal trauma in our clients, it must be attended to in our coaching relationships. As we grow in our understanding of ourselves and the impact that trauma has on our humanity, we also grow in compassion, non-judgment, empathy, wonder and championing for ourselves and others – and those are just the characteristics needed for transformation.

## CONSIDER OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Our nervous systems are constantly assessing and organizing themselves in response to threat and reward. In his book, *Coaching with the Brain in Mind*, Dr. David Rock calls these responses "away states" and "toward states." For effective coaching to take place, both the coach and the client need to be in toward states. This means that they are being motivated by something that they perceive as rewarding and that they are able to look inward because they are safe in their environment.

Our nervous system can be divided into categories: the Central Nervous System (CNS) and Peripheral Nervous System (PNS). Our CNS consists of interneurons that make up our brain and spinal cord. If we could give the CNS a job description, it might be to receive and process information by conducting signaling and initiating responses – kind of like a command center and information highway.

Our PNS consists of sensory neurons (nerve cells that send signals to the brain) and motor neurons (nerve cells that deliver signals from the brain to muscles, glands, organs, and other parts of the body). The PNS can be further

divided into our Somatic Nervous System that controls our conscious and voluntary movements and processes – the things we are asking our body to do or choosing to do; and our Autonomic Nervous System that controls our involuntary responses and processes – think breathing, heart rate, digestion, etc.

## Adjusting our coaching practices to include evidence-based interventions that increase well-being and decrease the negative impacts of trauma is essential to our effectiveness as coaches.

If we focus on our Autonomic Nervous System, it also has two distinct categories: our sympathetic nervous system and our parasympathetic nervous system. Our sympathetic nervous system controls our stress-response, which is commonly understood as our fight, flight or freeze response. When it is activated, our pupils dilate, heartrate increases, breathing quickens and expands, and among other things, hormones like adrenaline and cortisol are released into our bodies. This is an optimal state to be in if we need to outrun danger or if we need to fight to keep ourselves alive and become wounded.

However, in this stress-response state, we do not have access to the executive functioning systems in our brain, such as insight or conscious decision-making – our bodies – specifically, our sympathetic nervous systems – are already responding to whatever it perceives as a threat and is trying to keep us safe.

Our parasympathetic nervous system controls our resting state, which is commonly understood as our 'rest and digest response.' When it is activated, our mouths secrete saliva, heartrate decreases, breathing slows and deepens, and digestive organs get to work breaking down nutrition and secreting bile.

This is an optimal state for our bodies to be in most of the time. In this state, we are able to practice wellness, metab-

olize difficult emotional experiences, rest and heal, and play and create. We are able to access our brain's executive functioning and imaginative abilities, because both our bodies and our minds know we are safe.

Here's the rub: repeated or intense trauma over time makes us feel unsafe

in our own bodies. The persistent and recurring activation of our sympathetic nervous system creates a habituated state of being in survival mode. And this actually wears down our well-being all the way to the little pieces of our DNA called telomeres. Numerous studies have shown that the length of our telomeres (these protective short segments on the ends of our chromosomes) are indicative of our ability to fight off disease and live longer lives. When we experience a kind of distress that perpetually activates our sympathetic nervous system, it actually shortens our telomeres more rapidly.

## FLOURISHING FORWARD: COACHING PRACTICES

As coaches, we can incorporate specific practices into our coaching relationships that help us activate our parasympathetic nervous system and give our stress response a rest.

These practices help move us and our clients into a toward state where we can then coach using interventions that have been shown to actually lengthen our telomeres and create new neural pathways. By introducing these practices into our coaching relationships, we are quite literally preventing disease, decreasing inflammation, and creating the awareness needed to explore, discover, and move forward from a place of conscious choice.




  
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**1 Take Your Sessions Outside**  
 Nature is an incredible regulator. By taking your coaching sessions outside to a nature preserve, park, or other protected space, you can remove many of the threats, distractions and restrictions that trigger our stress-responses.

**2 Meditate with Your Clients**  
 There are many different options for meditation. Essentially, meditation is choosing to think about and/or focus on the same thing again and again. Dedicating just two or three minutes of a session to meditation can increase clarity and decrease anxiety significantly.

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**3 Start Sessions with Deep Breathing**  
 Practicing deep breathing regularly balances out your autonomic tone, helping you by deepening and expanding your breath, decreasing our heartrate, increasing saliva production, etc. Try 'magic breathing' or 'box breathing.'

**4 End Sessions with Gratitude**  
 Practicing gratitude intentionally orients your thinking mind toward goodness, reward, and empathy rather than what is wrong, threatening, and egocentric. Crafting a ritual with your clients that end your sessions with gratitude can help move both of you into a toward state around whatever is coming next.

**5 Focus on Embodiment**  
 If your coaching relationships are mostly check-ups from the neck-

up, consider adding movement and get curious about the client's embodied sensation. For example:

- Where is that emotion felt?
- What is its temperature?
- How much pressure and weight does it carry?
- How might you describe the intensity of its energy?
- What is the movement of it like - tingling, rushing, crushing, gripping, releasing, constricting, etc.
- What if we move? What is it like then?
- What if we breathe? What is it like then?

**6 Facilitate Exploration Through Expression**  
 Introduce art or sound into your sessions. Notice patterns first – naming becomes important when the client is ready to access their agency, choose a way forward, and create memory around their decision. Next, during exploration phases, when we're growing in awareness and expanding options, what is most important is noticing – remaining present with deep listening, attending to patterns that emerge, and transparently reflecting those patterns without judgment or interpretation.

We have all experienced past individual and collective difficulties that have shaped us and continue to impact our current reality; however, trauma-informed coaching may be just the thing that our brains and bodies need to flourish forward together. •