

Transpersonal Coaching Psychology: An Introduction to the Theory and Practice

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Abstract

Transpersonal Coaching Psychology (TCP) can be described as the theory and practice of coaching that takes a holistic and integrative approach to support client growth and transformation. The unique qualities and strengths of this approach to coaching are outlined, including how open awareness skills are applied as a means to hold a safe, compassionate and healing space for clients. TCP is trauma-informed and practitioners are also trained to differentiate between psychosis, burnout and states of consciousness that can be associated with spiritual awakening.

Opinion

In the Transpersonal Coaching Psychology Journal [1], Transpersonal Coaching Psychology (TCP) is described as the theory and practice of coaching that takes a holistic and integrative approach to support client growth and transformation. The role of a transpersonal coach is to support the client to develop a more expansive and interconnected sense of self and, in so doing, help the client to access the necessary resources (physical, intellectual, emotional, social, psychological and spiritual) that may aid the attainment of their fullest potential and performance. This is achieved through tailored processes to help clients identify what provides them with a sense of meaning and purpose and, in turn, to assist clients to find ways of consciously expressing this in their work, their personal life and within relationships. Conventional coaching, including life coaching and business coaching methods, typically involve a dialogue between a coach and a client, aiming to address issues from a cognitive-behavioural perspective. This means that only issues in conscious awareness are addressed and their unconscious causes remain unknown and/or unresolved. Interestingly, neuroscience has demonstrated that our unconscious functioning precedes conscious awareness by at least half a second [2,3]. The outcome of Libet's experiments indicate that most, if not all, issues such as low motivation, procrastination, conflicting priorities, overwhelm, performance anxiety, emotional suffering, fear, stress related problems and burnout are a result of automatic (unconscious) reactions and patterns which occur before conscious awareness. Conventional coaching methods rely heavily on conscious processing through questioning, analysis and tasking. This can be compared to the analogy of trying to steer a train by asking someone in the last carriage to change the direction of the entire train. It might not be very effective, especially not in the long run.

TCP involves identifying the unconscious processes that are at the root of the client's presenting issue most, yet it does so in a natural, client-centred and dialogical way that makes this methodology versatile and effective. This unique approach to coaching identifies the unconscious triggers and patterns that give rise to one's current thoughts, feelings, behaviours and their resulting circumstances. It helps clients to establish resourceful states and perspectives and then anchor these into the contexts where they experience challenges. Another unique quality of TCP is that the coach is trained to identify and make constructive use of the transpersonal phenomena that may also be influential in terms of the client's issue, or which may spontaneously arise in coaching sessions. These phenomena may be unnoticed, neglected, misunderstood, or pathologized in traditional coaching or healthcare. While it is important to identify if the client requires clinical care, it may be equally important to help the client to cope with, make sense of, and integrate their transpersonal experience in a non-clinical setting. TCP draws on the transcendent quality of consciousness to shift the client from an ego-centred focus on problems, towards an eco-centred (expansive and interconnected) awareness, drawing on the principles of nature and spiritual wisdom, but in a pragmatic and solution focussed manner that aims to empower people in the contexts of their everyday lives. TCP can be considered as a bio-psycho-socio-spiritual approach to coaching that may enable clients to resolve issues concerning the body, mind, relationships, and spirituality. This is achieved through whole-person oriented processes to help clients identify what provides them with a sense of meaning and purpose and, in turn, to assist them in finding ways of consciously expressing this – in their work, personal life, relationships and in society.

The Transpersonal Coaching Model [4] utilizes applied open awareness [5] as a means to hold a liminal space (open, receptive and emergent), walking the client through a transformative passage of questioning and expansion, while helping the client to integrate their new, widened and resourceful perspectives into the relevant areas of their life. Researching the phenomenology of Open Awareness (OA) [6] revealed that OA bears the following characteristics:

- Introspection: Metacognitive awareness in which we can mindfully observe mental activities, emotions and somatic experiences.
- Outrospection: Heightened awareness of others and the ways that we relate to them, which cultivates empathy and compassion.
- Envirospection: Broad awareness of the space around us which connects us to everything in the environment and the cosmos.

In the context of coaching, OA is a transpersonal perspective that is naturally ecological-beneficial for the client (introspection), beneficial for those with whom the client is in relationship (outrospection), and beneficial for the broader environment in which those relationships exist (envirospection). Transpersonal perspectives expand one's self-construct and worldview. This may be of value in coaching through cultivating expanded states of consciousness and integrating these in the context of everyday life. This way of coaching – beyond the ego – may help to transform a crisis into a spiritual awakening, which in turn can be leveraged to bring the expansive perception and the constructive ideas or solutions that it promotes into



challenging situations. Typical outcomes of this specialized coaching approach include greater clarity, improved performance and an enhanced sense of meaning and purpose in life (see the Transpersonal Coaching Psychology Journal, 2022, for case studies). Write [7] refers to the burnout syndrome as a “spiritual crisis on the way home” (p.1). He also describes burnout as “a form of deep human suffering at every level – physical, psychological, social, spiritual – which occurs when old ways of being in the world no longer work and start to disintegrate” [8]. Write’s combined descriptions of burnout are synonymous with what Grof [9] describes as spiritual emergency, being “a crisis, but at the same time an opportunity to ‘emerge’, to rise to a higher level of psychological functioning and spiritual awareness” (p.137). Similar to both of these authors, Taylor [10] also suggests that turmoil or suffering can lead to spiritual awakening.

TCP training involves learning how to identify the key differences between psychosis and spiritual emergency. In all cases, the role of the transpersonal coach is to hold a safe space while enabling the client to observe their experience from the embodied perspective of open awareness, which in turn supports the client to learn from their experiences, including those that were perhaps overwhelming or traumatizing. Unlike some traditional methods in psychotherapy that may have the client enter painful memories repeatedly, transpersonal coaches help their clients to access relevant memories and resources from the state and perspective of OA in which the client feels empowered and has access to their creative levels of consciousness, and which, in turn, may fertilize the ground for the potential of healing, transformation and post-traumatic growth. Transpersonal coaches are trauma-informed and they work in a trauma-sensitive manner. In regard to trauma healing, TCP draws from the work of Maté [11], Schwartz [12] (Internal Family Systems, E.G., 2021), Hübl [13], Dana [14], Vaughan Smith [15], Siegel [16], Van der Kolk [17], Levine [18], as well as knowledge from healing practices in the field of transpersonal psychology, such as psychosynthesis [19] and related approaches described in The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology [20], including applied mindfulness, breathwork and psychedelic assisted therapies.

Since transpersonal coaching utilizes expanded states and perspectives, these coaching processes frequently enter the grey space – where therapy and coaching intersect. Transpersonal coaches undergo extensive training in how to hold this grey space with care, compassion and open awareness. In so doing, the root causes of clients’ issues may be unveiled, including deep wounds and trauma, if that exists for the client. Conventional forms of coaching steer away from confronting those underlying issues, sometimes leaving the client feeling fragmented and confused, but in TCP it is recognized that these phenomena cannot be ignored and that it is not always appropriate for the coach to immediately refer a client to a therapist that the client is not familiar with when they have entrusted the coach to help them. In these cases, compassionate support and guidance for integration are crucial, and this is one of the hallmarks of TCP. Transpersonal coaches also know their limits in terms of professional expertise, and they can identify if the client should be referred for more clinical care.

Conclusion

To summarise, a working definition of TCP by Certified Transpersonal Coach, Christine Miskelly, published in the Transpersonal Coaching Handbook (2022): “TCP is the study of methods, processes and practices which enable individuals to transcend the usual ego-based understanding of self. It includes an understanding of the value of various non-typical or altered states of consciousness to expand awareness for both coach and client. It sees the relationship between coach and client as being collaborative and acknowledges the existence of a shared realm of consciousness which can be accessed and which can inform decisions and experience. TCP does not exclude traditional cognitive-

behavioural models of coaching but expands upon them adding a further dimension. It seeks not simply to help clients resolve problems but to deepen their sense of peace, wisdom, purpose and oneness. It can address profound crises by acknowledging their reality, considering their meaning for the client and facilitating their integration into everyday life”.

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