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Understanding and tackling procrastination

Michael Neenan

Introduction

Coaching aims to bring out the best in people in order to help them achieve their desired goals. While a lot of the coaching literature is full of exciting promises of unleashing your potential, reinventing yourself or living your dream life by implementing dynamic action plans, the ‘unexciting’ side of coaching can involve tackling some of the usual change-blocking problems familiar to therapists, such as perfectionism, procrastination, excessive self-doubt, lack of persistence and self-depreciation. Unless these psychological blocks are overcome, little progress is likely to be made in achieving the person’s coaching goals. Therefore, the coach needs to be competent in addressing both the psychological and practical aspects of change.

A theoretical model for understanding and tackling psychological blocks in general and procrastination in particular is rational emotive behavioural therapy (REBT; Ellis, 1994), founded in 1955 by the late Albert Ellis, an American clinical psychologist. (REBT is one of the approaches within the field of CBT.) A capsule account of the REBT approach follows. The approach proposes that rigid and extreme thinking (irrational beliefs) lies at the core of psychological disturbance. For example, faced with a coachee who is sceptical about the value of coaching, the coach makes himself very anxious and over-prepares for each session by insisting: ‘I must impress her with my skills [rigid belief – why can’t he let the coachee make up her own mind?], because
if I don’t this will prove I’m an incompetent coach’ (an extreme view of his role to adopt if the coachee is unimpressed). Rigid thinking takes the form, for example, of must, should, have to and got to. Derived from these rigid beliefs are three major and extreme conclusions: awfulising (nothing could be worse and nothing good can come from negative events), low frustration tolerance (LFT; frustration and discomfort are too hard to bear) and depreciation of self and/or others (a person can be given a single global rating [e.g. useless] that defines their essence or worth).

What lies at the core of psychological health is flexible and non-extreme thinking (rational beliefs). Flexible thinking is couched in non-dogmatic preferences, wishes, wants and desires, and flowing from these flexible beliefs are three major non-extreme beliefs: anti-awfulising (things could always be worse and valuable lessons can be learnt from coping with adversity), high frustration tolerance (HFT; frustration and discomfort are worth bearing in order to achieve your goals) and acceptance of self and/or others (individuals are too complex to be given a single global rating but aspects of the person can legitimately be rated, e.g. bad timekeeping doesn’t make you a bad person). The concepts of the REBT approach have been applied for over 30 years to tackling problems in the workplace (DiMattia, 1991; Ellis, 1972; Dryden and Gordon, 1993a) and, more recently, to coaching (Anderson, 2002; Kodish, 2002; Neenan and Dryden, 2002a).

When the REBT approach is used outside of a therapy context it is more advantageous to call it rational emotive behavioural coaching (REBC), although some practitioners prefer to use the shorter name of rational coaching (see Palmer, 2009). REBT terms such as ‘irrational’ and ‘disturbance’ can be reframed as performance-interfering thoughts and/or self-limiting beliefs or any permutation on problematic thinking that coachees are willing to endorse.

**What is procrastination?**

Procrastination can be described as putting off until later what our better judgement tells us ought (preferably) to be
done now, thereby incurring unwanted consequences through such dilatory behaviour. The ‘putting off’ occurs because the person is actively seeking more interesting or pleasurable activities to engage in rather than experiencing now the discomfort or difficulty associated with doing the avoided tasks. It is important to distinguish between procrastination and planned delay: in the latter case there are legitimate reasons for postponing action, such as collecting more information before making an important decision (although this can segue into procrastination if the person becomes worried about making the wrong decision). Also, it would be incorrect to dismiss procrastination as mere laziness because the latter is a disinclination to exert oneself while the former frequently involves carrying out other tasks (i.e. being busy) in order to avoid getting on with the priority task that requires action now.

Procrastination is often described as ‘the thief of time’. As procrastination is, in essence, lack of self-management, a more personal way of describing it is to see yourself stealing your own time through your continuing inaction (Neenan and Dryden, 2002b). Another view of procrastination is that you give away your time free of charge – time that you might pay anything for on your deathbed to stay alive a little longer. So much time can be wasted through procrastination that you might believe you have several lives to lead instead of only one. People who become increasingly frustrated about their procrastination habits fear that they are wasting their lives, yet avoid doing what would help them to make more productive use of their time. This is what Knaus (1998: 7) calls the fundamental procrastination paradox: ‘When we try to buy time by procrastinating, we condemn ourselves to running out of time.’

Some surveys suggest that up to 20% of the adult population are chronically affected by procrastination (Persaud, 2005). Dryden (2000a) distinguishes between chronic situation-specific procrastination (e.g. constantly missing deadlines for filing tax returns) and chronic cross-situational procrastination that affects a number of important areas of a person’s life (e.g. avoiding whenever possible tedious or boring tasks that require more than minimal effort to
complete them). Chronic procrastination can have high costs:

It has been associated with depression, guilt, low exam grades, anxiety, neuroticism, irrational thinking, cheating and low self-esteem. As a result, procrastination probably accounts for much of why many never realize their full potential and so it can be an extremely disabling psychological condition.

(Persaud, 2005: 237)

In essence, chronic avoidance usually means chronic suffering (Lazarus, Lazarus and Fay, 1993).

**What stops productive action?**

Hauck (1982: 18) comments that poor self-discipline is an unsurprising human trait as ‘avoiding a difficult situation seems like the most natural course to take because we are so easily seduced by immediate satisfactions’. Freeman and DeWolf (1990: 234) state that ‘immediate enjoyment is what procrastination is all about. Ice cream instead of struggle’. Adair (1988: 14) suggests that ‘it is the vice of people who like to consider work rather than actually do it’. Dryden (2000b) observes that procrastination is often a behavioural way of protecting yourself from experiencing an unpleasant emotional state, such as feeling highly irritated if you start working on a boring task you wish you did not have to do. Sapadin and Maguire (1996: 10) state that ‘procrastination is caused by an internal conflict’ and have identified six fundamental procrastination styles:

1. **The perfectionist** is reluctant to start or finish a task in case it proves to be less than perfect and therefore is seen to fail in his own and/or others’ eyes.
2. **The dreamer** wants life to go smoothly and avoids difficult challenges. Grandiose ideas are not translated into achievable goals. Ill at ease with daily reality, she retreats into fantasy.
3. **The worrier** fears things going wrong and being overwhelmed by events (lots of ‘What if . . .?’ catastrophic
thinking); risk or change is avoided and he has little confidence in his ability to make decisions or tolerate discomfort.

4 **The defier** is resistant and argumentative towards others’ instructions or suggestions because this means she is being told what to do or other people are trying to control her. An indirect form of defiance is passive-aggressiveness, such as saying ‘yes’ to others’ requests when the person really means ‘no’ because she is not prepared to take on the responsibility of doing them within the allotted time.

5 **The crisis-maker** likes to display bravado in declaring he cannot get motivated until the eleventh hour or this is when he does his best work; ‘living on the edge’ gives him an adrenaline rush. He has a low threshold for boredom in his life. Leaving things until the last minute often means that they do not get done on time or opportunities are missed.

6 **The overdoer** takes on too much work without establishing what her priorities are; time is managed inefficiently, leading to some work not being done, done poorly or finished later than agreed.

Sapadin and Maguire (1996) suggest that individuals display a mix of procrastination styles: some are more prominently displayed than others. From the REBT perspective, underpinning these various procrastination styles there are likely to be found ego disturbance and discomfort disturbance beliefs (Dryden and Neenan, 2004). Ego disturbance relates to the demands that we impose on ourselves and the consequent negative self-ratings that we make when we fail to live up to these demands. An ego disturbance belief likely to be found in perfectionists is: ‘I must do the task extremely well or else I’m a failure.’ Discomfort disturbance or low frustration tolerance (LFT) is related to the domain of human comfort and occurs when we make demands that comfortable life conditions must exist and, when they do not, to see these difficult or unpleasant conditions as unbearable. A discomfort disturbance belief likely to be found in dreamers is: ‘I shouldn’t have to work hard to
fulfil my dreams. I can’t stand having to get my mind around all those boring details.’ Of course, clients can have both types of beliefs underpinning their procrastination. For example, with perfectionists, as well as fear of failure, some may have LFT beliefs related to their need to reach their high standards *effortlessly* (e.g. ‘I shouldn’t have to struggle!’). Can procrastination ever be justified? Hauck (1980: 138) suggests that self-discipline can be abandoned if you have a terminal illness or are facing a firing squad in the morning: ‘Not to live life to the fullest when you are fairly certain life will be brief is folly.’ Apart from these situations, it is better to get the work done first before you slacken your self-discipline.

**The common denominator of procrastination**

According to Dryden and Gordon, the ‘one thing all people who procrastinate have in common ... is a clear-cut emotional problem’ (1993b: 59). Individuals might not be aware of their own emotional problem because of their avoidance behaviour, which protects them from experiencing it. In order to ‘release’ this emotion, they can face the situation in imagination or actuality and identify the irrational beliefs maintaining their procrastination by using the ABCs of the REBT approach:

- **Situational A** = activating event, such as imagining giving a presentation to a group of colleagues.

- **Critical A** = what the person is most troubled/upset about regarding the presentation: ‘Not being able to answer all of the questions.’

- **B** = irrational beliefs: ‘I must be able to answer all of the questions because if I can’t this will prove I’m a phoney or I don’t know my subject.’
C = consequences, such as the following:

- emotional: rising anxiety;
- behavioural: highly agitated, leans on table for support;
- cognitive: dwells on what being exposed as a ‘phoney’ will do to her reputation and career;
- physical: heart pounding, sweating, light-headedness, trembling;
- interpersonal: withdrawing from her colleagues in coffee and lunch breaks.

By exposing herself in imagination to giving the presentation (A) the person’s critical A is located, which triggers her irrational beliefs (B), which then largely determines her reactions at C. By avoiding the presentation, the coachee remains safe from being exposed as a ‘phoney’ but, at the same time, she sees herself as a ‘phoney’ for avoiding doing something she knows she is good at: ‘Phoney if I do and phoney if I don’t.’ Within the ABC model, it is of fundamental importance to teach coachees the difference between two types of thinking: $A \rightarrow C$ thinking, where events or others make you feel and behave in the way that you do (e.g. ‘Giving a presentation makes me anxious and agitated’); and $B \rightarrow C$ thinking, where you largely upset yourself by the irrational beliefs you hold about events or others, as shown in the ABC model above.

$A \rightarrow C$ thinking is likely to keep you feeling helpless in the face of events because you believe they have to change before you can, while $B \rightarrow C$ thinking frees you from this perceived helplessness by demonstrating that you, not events, largely determine how you feel and act (Dryden and Neenan, 2006). By changing your beliefs you can change your feelings and actions. The coach needs to monitor closely, but not obsessively, when the coachee is slipping back into $A \rightarrow C$ thinking instead of using $B \rightarrow C$ thinking and point out this cognitive slippage.
Some cautions in tackling procrastination

The coach may overly focus on the consequences of her coachee’s procrastination by exploring his feelings about it (e.g. ‘I feel angry and guilty about missing the deadline for the report. I’ve let people down’), thereby unwittingly helping to perpetuate his procrastination instead of uncovering what the coachee said to himself at the time in order to delay finishing the report on time (e.g. ‘Why should I have to do another one so soon after finishing the last one?’). This investigation would have revealed his procrastination as an act of rebellion against what he saw as his boss’s mistreatment of him.

What can seem perplexing to the coach is the coachee’s reply when asked how she would feel if she got on with the task: ‘Great’ (but no action is forthcoming). Why is she depriving herself of experiencing this feeling by her continuing inaction? Anticipating feeling ‘great’ is insufficiently motivating because she still has to face starting the task, which usually means a discomfort phase to contend with that currently acts as a deterrent to action (e.g. ‘There is so much information to sift through. I’ll feel overwhelmed, get angry and frustrated and give up’). So it is important for the coach not to take feeling ‘great’ at face value and thereby expect constructive action to occur – emotional disturbance still blocks the way! Even if the coachee forces herself to complete this particular task through a reluctantly self-imposed deadline and is mightily relieved once it is finished, her disturbance-inducing thinking is likely to be unmodified (e.g. ‘I hated doing it. I felt terrible. I shouldn’t have to put myself through that again’). As Grieger and Boyd (1980: 36) point out, focusing on ‘practical problems before emotional problems tends to rob clients of their motivation to solve their emotional problems, leaving them more comfortable yet still disturbed’.

Rewards might seem an obvious incentive to complete tasks but some individuals might become dependent on them, particularly if the tasks are onerous, and thereby avoid developing the intrinsic motivation to get the job done without a carrot being dangled in front of their noses (no reward, no action). In my experience, some individuals can become so reward-fixated that they give themselves a treat
in anticipation of doing the work, or they do not do it and then reward themselves again for pledging to do it tomorrow; they spend too much time thinking of new and more exciting rewards to give themselves because they have become jaded with the routine ones; or they rush the job to get the reward instead of focusing on the quality (usually poor) of the work being done. If coachees want to break the procrastination habit, then they need to be really clear why they want to change and be prepared to commit themselves to the sustained effort involved in changing ingrained behaviours – that is, developing intrinsic motivation. Rewards can only add to or enhance such motivation, not replace it.

Some coachees can be very articulate about the reasons for their procrastination, which impresses the coach who then assumes it is the prelude to forthcoming action, and so respectfully listens and listens and listens . . . but nothing happens. What the coach wants to be impressed with is action, not articulacy, and therefore he encourages the coachee to start carrying out an avoided behaviour in the session (e.g. making notes for an article) and maintaining the new behaviour between the sessions (finishing the article and sending it off to the publisher within an agreed timescale).

Tackling procrastination

Dryden (2000a) specifies four key stages to overcoming procrastination: becoming aware of one’s procrastination; developing goal-directed behaviour to carry out currently avoided tasks; making a commitment to tolerate short-term discomfort in order to achieve longer-term gains; and being persistent in maintaining an anti-procrastination outlook. I will use a person from my coaching practice to illustrate progress through these stages.

Awareness

Paul (not his real name) was a therapist who wanted to move into coaching and enrolled on some courses to learn more about the subject. Having completed the training, he continually put off finding people to coach, saying ‘the conditions
have to be right before I make my move’ and ‘maybe I need more training, maybe I’m running before I can walk’. As Knaus (1998: 68) asks in relation to generating awareness regarding one’s present behaviour: ‘How do you know when you need to stop doing one thing and start doing something else?’ One clue to answering this question was Paul’s agitation about not ‘getting on with it’ (i.e. seeking people to coach), which his rationalisations for the delay could not ease. Imagery is a good technique to ‘bypass defenses of rationalization and intellectualization’ (Weishaar, 1993: 117), therefore I asked Paul to imagine making an immediate start in seeking coachees and how did he feel in doing so?

**Paul:** If I was going to start now, I would feel pretty anxious.

**Coach:** What is anxiety-provoking in your mind about starting now?

[This is to focus his attention on searching for the beliefs driving his anxiety.]

**Paul:** Well, I’ll have to put myself out there, you know, find people to coach, start proving myself.

**Coach:** And if you do that . . .?

[This is called conjunctive phrasing – removing the full stop at the end of the coachee’s sentence and inserting a conjunction such as ‘and’ or ‘if’. This is done to nudge along the coachee’s thinking.]

**Paul:** I don’t feel completely confident about coaching people.

**Coach:** And if you don’t feel completely confident about coaching people . . .?

[Continuing with conjunctive phrasing to refine the cognitive aspects of his anxiety.]

**Paul:** Then I’ll fall flat on my face because they will see my lack of confidence. My clients will think that I don’t know what I’m doing, they’ve wasted their money.

**Coach:** And if they do think that . . .?

[What is the meaning for him of their putative thinking.]
Paul: Then I’ll be a failure, never make it as a coach.
Coach: Is that what you’re most anxious about: if you don’t feel completely confident about your coaching skills, then you’ll be revealed as a failure and your coaching career will be over?
[This summary is to check if the coachee’s critical A – what he is most anxious about in this situation – has been revealed.]
Paul: Yes, that’s it, but I can’t see a way forward at the present time.

The coachee’s critical A triggered his irrational beliefs (B), ‘I must be completely confident about my coaching abilities before I see any clients because if I don’t give value for money, then I’ll be a failure’, which, in turn, drove his anxiety (C). In REBT terms, this is a rigid must leading to an extreme conclusion (self-depreciation) if the must is not met, which is likely to be the case as musts are infrequently met (Neenan and Dryden, 2002b).

Paul was able to see how his irrational beliefs maintained his procrastination: he was demanding to feel completely confident before taking on clients instead of realising that confidence develops over time through practising his coaching skills with clients. To be even more accurate, courage comes before confidence: without taking risky and uncomfortable steps into the unknown, confidence will not be given the chance to develop. However, awareness does not necessarily lead to action, as Paul had already read a book on procrastination that he said was very insightful but ‘somehow the book didn’t give me the kick-start I needed’. Coaching would show him how to self-administer the ‘kick-start’ as well as keep the process of change going.

Goals

In order to develop an action plan for change, Paul needed to pinpoint a clear, specific, measurable goal that was within his control to achieve. Initially, he said his goal was to ‘stop procrastinating’. This goal was stated negatively (i.e. what
he does not want to do) rather than in positive terms of what he wants to do. As Cormier and Cormier (1985: 223) observe:

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

Paul put his goal in positive terms ‘to become a coach’ but this was a general directive for change rather than specifying the goal in concrete and measurable terms. After discussion to concentrate his thinking, he said his goal was ‘to have at least two fee-paying clients within the next three months’.

**Commitment**

When a person states his goals for change, this does not automatically mean that he has committed himself to carrying out the hard work to achieve them – his commitment may be to lip service instead of active service. As Leahy (2006) points out, once the goal has been established, the person needs to ask herself two key questions: ‘What do I have to do to get it?’ and ‘Am I willing to do it?’ In coaching as well as therapy, some individuals want a largely effort-free progress towards their goals. Grieger (1991: 60) states that effecting change is ‘a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week thing’. While this view may sound extreme, it can be used as a yardstick by coachees to measure their level of effort. If they want to make gains, then they need to embrace the daily discomfort of working on their difficulties now – no discomfort dodging! – in order to feel relatively comfortable later about continuing the work of change (Ellis, 2002). Also, the person is committing himself to ‘the possibilities that change may bring, even when there is no existing evidence to support this. The coachee has to commit to the unknown’ (Zeus and Skiffington, 2002: 131). The unknown is neutral and only turned into something fearful, dull or exciting depending on the coachee’s perception of what the future might hold.
Paul said he took responsibility for carrying out the work to bring about the changes he wanted. The next step was to teach him to dispute (D) his procrastination-perpetuating irrational beliefs. This disputing process occurs after the ABCs of the problem have been established. Disputing relies primarily on five points to help coachees see the self-defeating nature of their beliefs (Dryden and Neenan, 2004):

1 **Rigidity versus flexibility** – rigid beliefs allow no other outcome than the one demanded, whereas flexible beliefs support your goal-directed efforts while acknowledging the possibility of setbacks and activating contingency plans if needed.

2 **Extremism versus non-extremism** – extreme appraisals of self, others or events are harsh and unbalanced, whereas non-extreme appraisals are balanced and compassionate, seeing oneself, others and events in the round.

3 **Logic** – this looks at the internal coherence of your beliefs: No matter how much you prefer something to occur or not to occur, does it follow logically from your preferences that this event therefore must or must not occur?

4 **Empiricism** – this looks at the realistic basis of your beliefs: Do they correspond with the world as it actually is (empirical reality) or with your demands of how the world must be?

5 **Pragmatism** (often the most effective dispute in both therapy and coaching) – this looks at the concrete consequences of holding on to your irrational beliefs: Where are they getting you?

Through this examination of Paul’s irrational beliefs he was able to construct a rational alternative that helped him to manage better his considerable doubts about his coaching skills: ‘I realise that my confidence as a coach will develop over time, not overnight, through practice and good supervision and maybe some clients will think I’m not value for money. If that happens, I will remind myself that I have no immunity from such experiences but what I won’t do is call myself a failure based on these experiences; instead I will
accept myself as a fallible person who is striving to improve his competence as a coach.’ This rational alternative to his irrational belief was lengthy and elaborate as it needed to take a rounded view of his development as a coach in stark contrast to the all or nothing quality of his irrational beliefs. In time, Paul condensed his wordy rational belief to the terse: ‘Confidence comes with doing, reflection and feedback, so get on with it!’

An orderly sequence of goal-directed action steps coupled to timely completion dates was agreed with Paul, such as establishing a minimum number of cold calls to Human Resources (HR) departments per week, preparing a coaching brochure, giving a presentation on the benefits of coaching to a local Chamber of Commerce meeting, practising coaching on some willing friends, seeking advice from experienced coaches. Paul said he would ‘try’ to carry out these steps. When people say they’ll ‘try’, this suggests little effort or responsibility on their part to effect change and lacks the commitment that ‘doing’ denotes (Paul had been trying to overcome his procrastination without success, so it was important not to reproduce in coaching a failed strategy). A way to teach coachees the difference between trying and doing is to ask them if at the end of the session they will try to leave the room or actually leave it. Trying will keep them in the room for some time, maybe indefinitely, while doing means they will have left it in seconds. Doing, coupled with a careful review of what has been done, learnt and what needs to be done next, is much more likely to bring results than trying, which can become a vicious circle of constantly reviewing failed attempts at task completion. While Paul understood and accepted that ‘doing gets the job done’, he still faltered over its implementation.

**Persistence**

It can be easy for some coachees to think that an initial surge of productivity in tackling their procrastination heralds the end of their ‘I’ll do it tomorrow’ attitudes. However, they can easily run out of steam after several days
of effort and then find themselves reaching for their familiar excuses for inaction. As Ellis (1991: 10) has repeatedly stated: ‘The power in people’s “willpower” consists of their strong determination to change themselves plus persistent work and practice to carry out this determination’ (italics in original). Paul started to lose momentum with his anti-procrastination plan, particularly with regard to cold calling HR departments in local businesses to promote his coaching practice – he made cold calling a ‘hot’ (i.e. emotionally charged) issue:

Paul: I’m getting demoralised with this cold calling business.

Coach: It can be a hard grind, but how are you demoralising yourself about it up here (tapping head)? [Turning the coachee’s attention towards his own thinking to start the investigation.]

Paul: I’m not demoralising myself. It’s just what happens when people are not interested in your services.

Coach: Is it their job to help you set up your private practice? [This is to remind him that setting up his private practice is his responsibility, not the shared responsibility of anyone he contacts for work.]

Paul: True, but it’s still not nice being rejected every day.

Coach: Are they rejecting you or your services? [Is the coachee able to see the difference?]

Paul: Well, it feels like it’s both.

Coach: Feelings are not necessarily facts: when they turn down your services, do they say they are also rejecting you or is that the part you add on? [The coach’s hypothesis is that the coachee is rejecting himself when companies reject his services.]

Paul: Well, I didn’t think of it like that. Of course they don’t say ‘we’re rejecting you as well’. When I put the phone down, I think I’m a failure for not getting any work.
Coach: With that belief in mind, how does it affect subsequent phone calls?
[Bringing the coachee back to the issue of self-demoralisation and its consequences.]

Paul: Well, I lose confidence in myself, just go through the motions on the phone; in fact, I often rush my spiel to get it over with and feel quite relieved, only temporarily though, when it’s over. I hardly sound inspiring on the phone. I find ways to avoid the phone calls. I dread them. That failure belief is still with me.

Coach: Now, we’ve discussed that belief change occurs over time, not overnight. Do you remember some of the important steps in belief change?
[Attempting to elicit the information from the coachee to assess his level of understanding of change processes. The coach does not want to do the coachee’s thinking for him by telling him.]

Paul: If I want to get my new beliefs from here to here (pointing to his head, then his heart), I need to put them into practice every day, experience and tolerate the discomfort involved in change, keep pushing myself until I’m thinking and acting in the new way.

Coach: Experiencing some daily goal-directed discomfort is a sign of progress. What about the old beliefs?
[Thinking in new ways does not mean that the old beliefs will slip quietly away.]

Paul: I know they’re going to still trouble me but it is important to keep reminding myself of the unwanted consequences I’m getting if I hold on to them, so keep disputing those beliefs. But it’s still a struggle to do it when there’s no success!

Coach: No immediate success. Something I would like you to consider is the difference between failure and failing. Failure is the outcome of this process of seeking work as a coach; failing can be seen as the steps in this process, each step an attempt at finding clients. Failing doesn’t have to mean failure; it can also mean that success is the
outcome of a series of failings – you eventually get your first client. So, using this distinction, currently you’re failing, but your efforts haven’t ended in failure.

[The coach supplies some didactic input to bolster the coachee’s efforts to find clients as well as giving him a ‘break’ from answering questions as this can be wearisome if it is the only mode of learning.]

Paul: I like that. That’s a very interesting distinction to make – I never would have thought of that.

Coach: So what do you propose to do before our next session?

[Securing the coachee’s commitment to carrying out further goal-directed steps.]

Paul: I’m going to put a sign by the phone, ‘Only my services are being rejected, not me!’ and keep at it by telling myself that by failing I can end up eventually succeeding.

Through such techniques, Paul was able to refocus his energies on working towards his three-month goal, which, at the end of this period, resulted in three fee-paying clients, one more than he had hoped for. By the end of coaching he had developed a new and effective (E) rational outlook, the last stage in the ABCDE model of identifying and overcoming psychological blocks to change: he accepted (without liking it) the uncertainty and hard work involved in setting up a coaching practice, and strove (not always successfully) to accept himself irrespective of the difficulties he encountered in this endeavour.

In order to maintain their gains from coaching, coachees need to develop a ‘maintenance message’ which is a ‘lifelong responsibility to protect your progress from your own forgetfulness, inaction or neglect’ (Neenan and Dryden, 2006: 75). Coachees can spend a few minutes every day going over the benefits of their new beliefs; additionally, procrastination is likely to reappear from time to time and this can be dealt with by coachees searching for and disputing the rigid and extreme beliefs that have slipped back into their thinking.
Paul’s maintenance message was ‘Persevering Paul’, which encapsulated the key REBT principles of striving for high frustration tolerance and self-acceptance, which, when internalised, helped to reduce the frequency, intensity and duration of his emotional difficulties. Paul’s vulnerability to future episodes of procrastination was likely to be his doubts about his confidence and competence if a coachee was dissatisfied with his performance or cancelled appointments: ‘I should be a better coach than I am and then this wouldn’t happen.’ He needed to remind himself on these occasions that no coach is immune from experiencing these events and that the criteria for evaluating his performance should be reasonable and realistic, not grandiose (‘I should feel really confident all the time, have perceptive answers to all their questions and be seen as an outstanding coach’). His longer-term goal was to develop his coaching practice so that eventually there would be a 60:40 percentage split between his coaching and therapy clients, respectively. Booster sessions were agreed to monitor Paul’s progress towards this goal.

**Conclusion**

Often the same problems appear in coaching as in therapy. This chapter has focused on the all too common problem of procrastination and how the REBT approach can help coaches, particularly those without a professional background in psychology, to understand both the factors maintaining it and what needs to be done to overcome it. To change a behavioural pattern such as procrastination ‘requires work, and typically lots of it. Ironic as it may seem, the problem of avoiding work can only be solved by doing more work’ (Knaus, 1993: 37; Knaus, 2010). This involves uncovering and then disputing vigorously the irrational beliefs, which insist that a task or situation, for whatever reason, is too difficult to face. By internalising an anti-procrastination outlook, coachees are then much less likely to squander their time – an irreplaceable resource, unlike cars, food or clothes – and, instead, harness it to the pursuit of important life goals.
Discussion issues

- Does coaching focus too much on ‘selling’ the exciting possibilities of change, thereby underplaying the hard work required to achieve this change?
- Many therapy approaches are adapted for coaching purposes. Is there a real difference in this adaption or is it just therapy in disguise?
- What do you think of the idea that there is always an emotional problem underpinning procrastination?
- What might be some of the strengths and limitations of rational emotive behavioural coaching?

References


Recommended reading
