

Working together: The value of developing strategic partnerships with coaching psychologists - focus on stress management

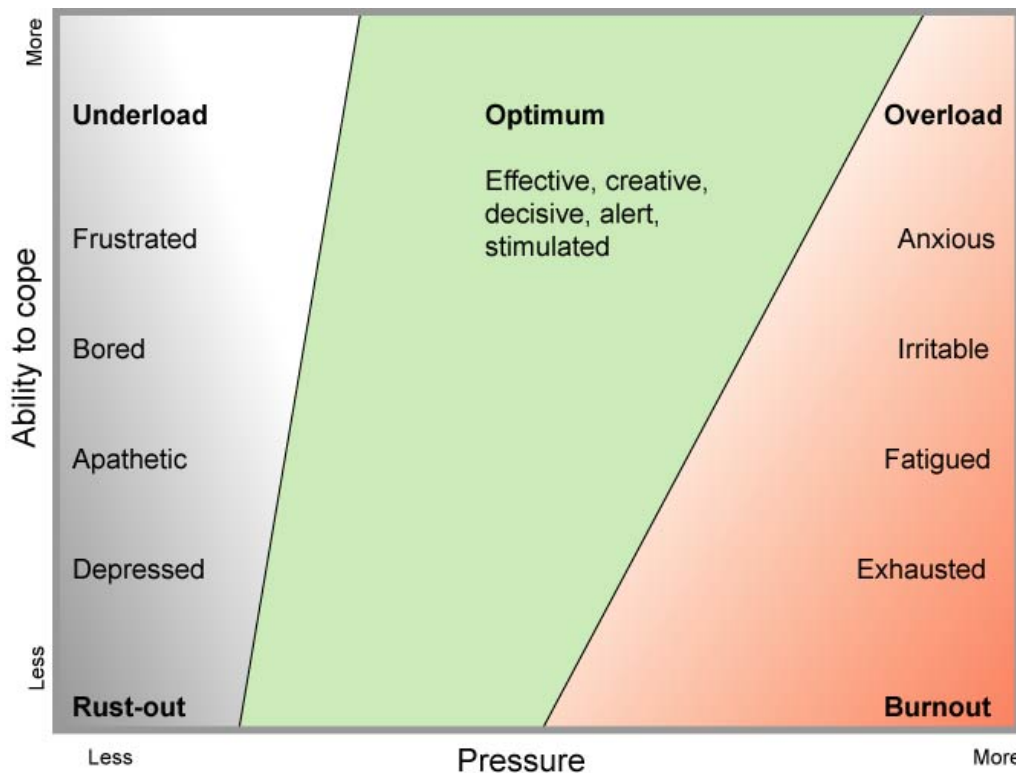
By Pauline Willis

Pressure is a natural and necessary part of living and the right amount of pressure actually leads to better performance at work as well as a fuller and more rewarding personal life.

Stress happens when people either do not have enough pressure or when they have too much. So the practical challenge for coaches is to support clients to achieve a balance that takes into account the amount of pressure that is optimal for that individual given their personal coping style and resources. A further challenge is to be able to identify when coaching is not enough and either on-referral to a coaching psychologist or the provision of joint services is the best way to address client needs.

The following diagram provides an overview of the relationship between pressure and ability to cope and outlines some of the key signs of psychological distress that can accompany either too much or too little pressure relative to coping resources.

The relationship of pressure to the ability to cope
(adapted from Palmer & Strickland, 1996)



As pressure is a natural part of life and non-psychologically trained coaches work with these issues, then how do coaches know if a client has reached the point where they need support from a professionally trained psychologist?

The answer to this question is not simple. However, all of the coaching codes of practice state that coaches must not work outside of their area of expertise and to on-refer when appropriate. If the coach suspects that life or work pressures are causing a significant impact on a clients personal well-being and/or work performance then codes of practice dictate that the coach should look closely at on referring.

Many coaches believe, however, that clients have the capacity to find their own solutions from within so the onus is on the client to generate their own solutions, with support from the coach. As the coach is not an expert provider there is no accountability or expectation that the coach will add value either by being able to assess when the client needs further .

Coaches are not generally trained to recognise what signs of psychological distress so there is some risk that clients who are 'stuck' in a pattern of thinking or relating to others that is contributing to their stress levels that coaching could, in theory negatively impact on the client rather than producing a positive outcome.

In these circumstances, professional, objective assessment of clients current sources of stress and personal development needs is indicated, however, the coach may not have the skills to conduct an assessment of this nature. Ideally, an assessment should be from someone who is qualified to conduct assessments of psychological wellbeing, understands complex stress issues and who can also assist the client in putting together a realistic personal development plan that can be supported either with professional psychological services or further coaching.

If the stress issues are work related then it is also worth considering that it may be the organisational culture or some other features of the working environment that are the main causes of their stress. In this instance it may be that the situation is not going to improve significantly irrespective of how much the client works on their personal issues. There are some situations where a client may be better off finding a more supportive working environment rather than over-investing in significant personal change through either an extensive coaching or a psychological intervention. Expert assessment is vital in ensuring that the appropriate level and type of service is applied.

Do I need to learn more about managing stress & the boundary between psychological practice and coaching if I do not intend to specialise as a 'stress coach'?

With work & life related stress being highlighted in the media and with greater pressure on organisations from the government to resolve these issues there will be an increasing requirement for services in this area. There will also be a corresponding increase in the number of people presenting as coaching clients who need support in managing stress related issues even if this is not the primary reason for contracting a coach. Stress and associated psychological distress can be an important early warning signal that more specialised coaching services may be needed.

To be effective in on-referring to psychologists or specialised stress counsellors, it is very important for professional coaches to understand the boundary between coaching and psychological services. Both the skills and professional confidence to either work alongside a psychologist/stress counsellor or on-refer clients where this is appropriate are essential competences for all coaches irrespective of whether they work in business or life domains.

Working within the boundaries of competence and ensuring that clients are on-referred to appropriate sources of support is also a mandatory requirement for all EMCC members in order to conform with the Code of Ethics. With regard to on-referral to psychological services is unrealistic to expect that a coach will be able to make this assessment effectively without specific professional training or support. This kind of training is not generally provided within basic coach training programmes. This means that there are likely to be many 'qualified' practising coaches for whom there is a potential and significant 'skills gap' and where additional training or support is needed to develop the knowledge and skills to effectively on-refer to specialised psychological services.

One option is to go and enrol on one of the coaching psychology training programmes that are now on offer and which have been designed to address this need. This will increase understanding of what psychological techniques are on offer as well as the differences between coaching and psychological practice. Another creative business option that does not necessarily involve significant up front investment in training is to develop a professional partnership with one or more coaching psychologists.

What is a professional partnership and why would it add value to my coaching practice?

Coaching Psychologists provide specialised psychological coaching services and will work alongside coaches who are not psychologists to provide a professional assessment service as well as specialised coaching services to address complex personal issues such as stress management. A coaching psychologist can also provide supervision for coaches in circumstances where it is appropriate for the coach to incorporate psychological techniques within their practice.

This type of partnership can exist simply as an ad hoc agreement to work together as and when appropriate or it can be more formal in nature and involve contracting a coaching psychologist to provide specific aspects of the coaching business.

Professional partnerships with psychologists are valuable for coaches as they provide access to the specialised support needed to make informed judgements about when to on-refer as well as opportunities for coaches to develop advanced coaching skills involving psychological approaches and techniques. Having the backup and support of a Coaching Psychologist can also be a valuable selling point in the increasingly competitive coaching marketplace.

How would I find a Coaching Psychologist who would be interested in a partnership of this nature?

Coaching Psychologists who specialise in coaching supervision and who are keen to apply psychological knowledge and skill appropriately within their practice can be found through the www.coachingpsychologist.net online professional development and supervision network. You will also be able to find psychologists who coach, or who specialise in Coaching Psychology via the 'find a psychologist' service offered by psychological associations and societies in your country of residence.

About the author

Pauline Willis is a Coaching Psychologist with Lauriate Ltd. www.lauriate.com/

She is also a Director of The Coaching & Mentoring Network Ltd

www.coachingnetwork.org.uk and is the 2006 Chair of the BPS Special Group in Coaching Psychology www.bps.org.uk/coachingpsy/

Pauline can be contacted by email pauline.willis@lauriate.com, by phone +44 (0)1865 784388 and through her website at www.lauriate.com/