

Coaching and mental training

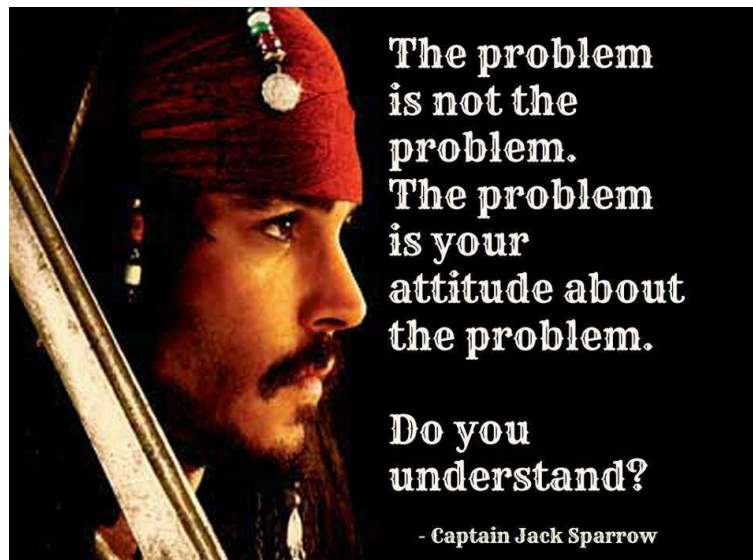
Geir Isene

strongly inspired by Brendan Martin

assisted by Tiril Eckhoff

Version: 2015-08-08

License: CC by-sa



Abstract

Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication. (Leonardo da Vinci)

1 The simplicity of coaching

I have coached several hundred people in all walks of life. From executives of international companies and housewives to artists, top athletes and business people of widely different trades.

I have used many different tools and methods to help others. And the coaching has almost uniformly resulted in great success. But it is only recently that I managed to distill the reasons for success into two simple keys:

1. Remain mentally fully present and uncover what the person really needs and wants. Find the goal of the coaching from the person, and not from your own assumptions or preconceived ideas. Never use a set method. Acquire instead tools that can be tailored to fit the person's goals.
2. Help the person to not give a fuck.

That's it.

There are usually many different aspects of life the person needs to tackle. From my experience, a person's inability to handle a situation is always linked to the person's own tension, stress or drama. He simply cannot let go of being uptight about the problem. The problem is never that serious, and the less serious the person thinks the problem is, the better equipped he is to handle it. Usually, the person knows how to handle the situation, he only needs to let go of the uptightness, simmer down and do what he knows is right. Sometimes the person needs some new knowledge – then I help him get that. But as long as the person remains uptight and serious, he won't be of much use to himself.

The best way to help the person not give a fuck is to get him to start doing something about the problem he is facing. Not to indulge in mental exercises, visualizations, meditations or other indirect attempts. A gradual tackling of the actual situation will help him see that the mountain is not unsurmountable. Get him to clean out the garage, talk to his wife, quit the job he hates, whatever. Tackle the main problem, not anything else. No beating around the bush. This will ease the tension. He will gain self confidence. And he will relax. Finally, he will be on top of the situation, any situation. Be there for him. All the way.

2 One tool for helping another

My toolbox is large and contains a vast array of methods to help others depending on what they want to achieve. But above all, I hold the attitude that the other person's interest, desires and goals are more important than any tool or method. I practice winging it more than anything else.

But there is one tool that I often use to help a person get back on his feet. It is a method I have found very effective when dealing with everything from a person coping or struggling to those who consider taking their own lives. This has nothing to do with introspection or therapy – I leave that to others. It has everything to do with getting shit done.

Here's the simple way you can help another (or yourself):

1. Tell the person to write a list of everything he hasn't completed. Everything that nags him, that he thinks he should have done or should do. Every bad conscience. Everything. If it takes a stack of papers, it takes a stack of papers. If the list is short, so be it. But ensure you have exhausted his incomplete actions, his bad conscience. You are not interested in why the actions wasn't done or any explanation for them. Forget prioritizations or categorizations at this point. The list can be all messy or upside-down. Doesn't matter. Just get everything down on paper.
2. Tell the person to remove everything he no longer has the opportunity or ability to do. This could be items like "Be a firefighter before I become 25 years old" (he is now 35) or "Be the next great goal keeper on Barcelona Football Club" (he is 35 and has a bad left knee). Strike out anything that he can no longer do. Make sure he also removes it from his mind.
3. Tell the person to remove everything he no longer *wants* to do. No matter what the reason is, anything that he really doesn't want to do is removed from the list. Make sure he also removes it from his mind. He now has a list of actions that he can, will and should complete.
4. Prioritize. In the order of what is really bothering him. The worst shit goes on the top, and all the way down to the more insignificant itches.
5. Make him do the one thing that bothers him the most. Help him. Complete the action together with him, or sit there while he completes it. Then make him do the second biggest source of worry. Then the third, the fourth and so on. Until you are confident he can do more actions on the list as home work. Follow it through until the person himself is confident he can do anything on such a list all by himself.

Do this and you will have a friend for life. And your friend will have a different life. This happens to be the tool I use that usually has the most profound effect on a person who is struggling in life.

3 Like!

A few years ago, I got the idea that it should be possible to like anything. Yes, anything. But while it may perhaps be a distant, even unreachable goal, it has shown to be a worthwhile pursuit.

I started out with the small, everyday things. Liking the noise from the neighbor. Liking my own irritation on a bad day. Liking others' criticism of me. Liking nasty people. The cold. The failure on a job. Unpleasant food. The pain at the dentist's. Practice makes perfect. Or at least approaching perfect. Because it seems an everlasting quest for liking anything. And the rewards are great :-). Life is brighter, more fun and there is a higher harmony. The alternative is less pleasing.

Just think about it, is there any benefit in NOT liking stuff? You might as well like it, even enjoy it – and life will be brighter from it.

4 Your life

What if you at your core is potential will? And as you start to exercise that potential, you create. You create and add to the game of life. Each creation is an expenditure of your potential – of your will. You trade potential will for actual experience. The more you cumulatively affect, the more affects you. And what if you actually create every experience you have at every instance? Not that you necessarily create everything that is – but every effect it has on you.

It's like a game of soccer. You stand outside the field watching other players. You decide to pitch in. At the instance you join the game, you are subject to a set of rules. The only way to not be affected by the rules is to leave the game. But as long as you decide to play, your choices, your will is limited by the rules. And the more agreements you enter into – such as formations and your position in the team, the less free will you have left.

Like in business. You start off with two bare hands and a brilliant idea. You have a whole vista of opportunities. As you create the company, you add substance, but at the same time you relinquish your range of possible choices. You trade free will for focus, for creations. And the more you create, the more you own. But what you own also owns you. It takes a hold of your freedom.

You expand your company, adding people, products, processes and partners. Company rules, regulations and bureaucracy. And limitations to your free will. When Facebook was a startup... when HP or Apple was garage companies, the founders had lots of ideas and plenty of free will. But as the companies expanded, their freedom within that game diminished. To regain freedom, they could pack up and do something else.

What if this is how it is on all levels in life?

What if you create every thought and every emotion you experience? Every high, every nightmare. What if all you had to do to not have the nightmare was to “wake up” – to stop creating those thoughts, those fears?

Maybe the idea of others being responsible for your thoughts, emotions or actions is limiting your own free will? Maybe your assigning your responsibilities to others is you “digging your own grave”. Perhaps this is why “letting go” works so well. Simply saying “fuck it” to the blame, shame and regret – and just not creating those haunting thoughts, those painful emotions anymore.

Adding structure limits freedom, adding policies limits choices and adding complexities limits potential.

These musing could funnel four valid therapies to regain one's freedom in any area:

1. Just “letting go” and say “fuck it” to the limitations you yourself create
2. Spotting the fact that you create those thoughts, those emotions in order to be able to “let go”
3. Exercising “liking” a situation or at least your own created feelings regarding a negative situation
4. “Exposure training” where you force yourself to do the opposite of creating the limitations

The last point would include the exposure to spiders for the person suffering from arachnophobia or skydiving if you are afraid of heights. Research shows that two to four exposures to your fears per week will “wear it out”. You would expose your fear on a gradient – to challenge the unpleasant feeling of fear increasingly until it subsides. It is important to not overdo it or make the challenge insurmountable. It's like lifting weights to build your bodily strength.

From my experience these therapies tend to work better than regression or “looking inward into your mind”.

It boils down to “doing what helps” and “not doing that which doesn't help” in any given situation. Creating feelings of “stress” or “panic” or “rage” may not be very helpful. If you looked at the situation calmly you may come to the conclusion that there are other, more helpful feelings that you could have created instead.

Living in the present, not delving into the past or living in the future, that is a key to happiness. But if you realize that you are able to create any thought and any emotion, you really don't need any means or any excuses to be happy. Just create happiness. It takes training to do so when life is inviting you to create other emotions. It may be hard to create a happy you when you are stuck in the dentist's chair. But instead of giving away your key to your thoughts and emotions – your life... training and exercise will eventually get you there – taking control of your own thoughts, emotions – your life.

5 Purpose and life

Purpose plays an important part in the article, “Processes, automation and human potential”¹.

Purpose gives life. Purpose drives life. The meaning of life is determined by the purposes that drives us. As I see it, we are free to give life any meaning we choose through the purposes we elect. And this may well be the only meaning life has. So diverse and complicated, yet so feeble.

In coaching struggling young people, I see lack of purpose as one major reason why a person could consider ending his life. While a strong purpose gives life, a lack of purpose results in a lack of life.

When a person loses a strong purpose, a valuable desire, the person “dies” to that degree. It doesn’t seem to matter what the purpose is, or whether it is a “good” purpose. A soldier returning from a war has lost a purpose to fight. When a terrorist group is defeated, a lot of people lose a strong purpose. Losing a job is a loss of purpose. Losing a loved one. Being kicked out of a team. Or losing the tools or means to achieve a purpose. They all amount to losing some zest in life.

The ability to find meaning, to create meaning in life is perhaps the most important of all abilities. Children excel at this. Adults less so. But I believe this ability can be exercised like any other ability. Training oneself to create meaning, purposes, desires and then going for it amounts to training oneself to live. Getting closer to achieving your purposes generates happiness. Happiness is a basic purpose, a good reason for living :) But remember – achieving a purpose is also a loss of purpose. This is why one should exercise oneself to be ready to give new meaning to life by setting new goals.

6 The games of life

What defines a game?

Purpose.

Purpose explains a game. It delimits a game. It makes the game.

A game is anything defined by at least one purpose – a computer game, a game of chess, watching a movie, a project or job, a relationship, family – even life itself. Different participants in a game have different purposes. While the sum of the purposes defines a common game, each person has his own version of that game – defined by his purpose(s).

So when we talk about the importance of being able “to let go”, what are we letting go of? When a person is stuck in the loss of a girlfriend or enraged by losing his job, he needs to be able to say “fuck it” and let it go. But what is “it”? The now ex-girlfriend? The job he had? No. The ex-girlfriend represented a game. The job was another game. Both had a defining purpose, and *that* is what he needs to let go of.

To enjoy the games we play, it is important to manufacture purposes, to give life to the games in order to reap the benefits – experiences and emotions. It is equally important to be able to stop creating a purpose – to let it go. Freedom is achieved by the ability to create and not create purposes, to go into and out of games freely.

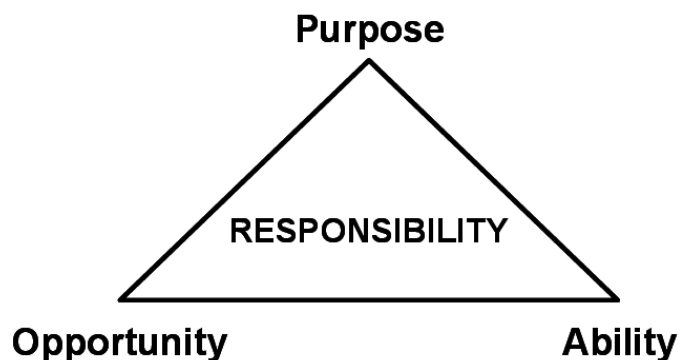
Pride, ego and “having to be right” makes it harder to letting go and to create new purposes.

In order to get the full benefits of a game, one has to give value to that purpose. The more valuable a purpose is, the more serious the stakes are, the more benefits can be harvested. Self-suggestion becomes an integral part. But one can get to the point where a game gets too real and becomes overwhelming. That’s when you pull out the tool called “fuck it”. Even when you die. But until that time you might as well get maximum enjoyment out of the games of life.

¹Processes, automation and human potential: <http://isene.com>

7 Opportunity – Ability – Purpose

The article, “Processes, automation and human potential” presents an interesting triangle that describes what elements make up “Responsibility” – the keys to getting things done. Making anything happen boils down to having the opportunity, the ability and the purpose or will to do so.



With enough purpose you will acquire the ability and find the opportunity to make it happen. With less resolve, will and purpose, you must rely on already acquired abilities. With less will and skill, you must rely on the opportunity coming your way. With no resolve or ability in an area, the opportunities will float past you and you won't even notice.

Assessing a subject's level of resolve and purpose, abilities and skills, purpose and circumstance will help you figure out how to best tailor the coaching. There are different tools for each of the triangle's corners, but for now it will suffice to make the reader aware of this triangle as a useful model in coaching.

8 Some mental exercises

I was an active Scientologist for 25 years. While there are a number of negative issues with the church and the philosophy, there are also some useful exercises for life coaching. Much of my approach in coaching would contradict Scientology, but some elements have found its way to my toolbox. Most people that have done some Scientology training report gains from the communication training offered by the church. I have taken some of the communication training drills and successfully applied them as a mental trainer and coach. I have adapted the drills, left out several and streamlined them for mental training.

The exercises are done in sequence. The mental trainer would usually ensure the subject masters one exercise before commencing to the next. When all exercises are mastered, one can then get back to training any one of them as needed. As usual in training someone, it is wise to focus on fully correcting one issue at a time.

8.0 Exercise 0 (X0)

Purpose: To increase the subject's ability to be fully alert and at rest mentally.

Result: The subject can, without discomfort, sit still, be fully alert and do nothing in the mind for at least 30 minutes straight.

The subject sits on a comfortable chair with closed eyes. He or she is to sit still and practice being awake and alert while doing nothing mentally. No "thinking about this or that", no visualizing, counting or any other variation of mental gymnastics.

The whole point is to be able to do nothing.

The trainer would sit in front of the subject, watching. The trainer would correct any twitching, moving about, dozing off or anything resembling mental gymnastics. Normal breathing, the occasional correcting of an uncomfortable position is natural and obviously not corrected. When the subject has mastered the most fundamental exercise and able to do nothing, one moves on to the next.

8.1 Exercise 1 (X1)

Purpose: To increase the subject's ability to be fully alert and mentally at rest while facing another.

Result: The subject can, without discomfort, look at another person and do nothing for at least 30 minutes straight.

The subject sits in the chair looking at the trainer. Calmly and without bodily or mental discomfort. The trainer would correct any twitching, moving about, dozing off or anything resembling mental gymnastics. Normal breathing, blinking or the occasional correcting of an uncomfortable position is not corrected.

8.2 Exercise 2 (X2)

Purpose: To increase the subject's ability to be fully alert and mentally at rest in difficult situations.

Result: The subject can, without discomfort, look at another person and do nothing regardless of what the other person is doing for at least 30 minutes straight.

Having mastered the ability to calmly sit and look at another, the bar is raised. The trainer sits in front of the subject and tries his best to make the subject react to his words or motions. The trainer doesn't touch the subject but may say anything or act out anything to provoke a reaction. If the subject reacts, the trainer is careful to repeat exactly what he did that caused the reaction – until there is no more reaction to that phrase or motion. He then moves on to other potentially provocative phrases or gestures.

The point of this exercise is not to train the person to become an “unfeeling robot”. The point is to help the subject to *be able to* stand his ground even in tough situations.

8.3 Exercise 3 (X3)

Purpose: To increase the subject's ability to acknowledge.

Result: The subject can comfortably acknowledge another's communication.

An important part of life is to acknowledge or “park” a communication or action. It is important to let another person know that you have understood what he said. It is likewise important to end off or “park” actions. It's equally important to end off or “park” thoughts that are distractions. And perhaps above all - it's important to acknowledge oneself.

To train the subject the ability to acknowledge, the trainer states a phrase to the subject. The subject then appropriately acknowledges that statement. The acknowledgement can be anything from “Thank you” to “That's nice”, “Good”, “Cool shit” or anything that is appropriate. The acknowledgement must give the trainer the notion that the subject has understood the communication. The acknowledgement must also end off and “park” that communication.

If the subject makes an inappropriate, too soft or too hard an acknowledgement, the trainer will correct the subject and make the same statement again. Until the subject can appropriately acknowledge that statement.

To make it easier for the trainer to have statements to give to the subject, he may use a book with lots of statements like “Alice in Wonderland”. The trainer would read a statement in the book to himself, then look at the subject and deliver that statement as though it was his own statement.

As the subject's ability to acknowledge another's communication increases, so may his ability to “park” a thought and end off a task. The trainer should ask the subject how his ability to acknowledge a communication can be applied to acknowledging himself.

As with all these exercises, the subject sits on a comfortable chair in front of the trainer – except for X5.

8.4 Exercise 4 (X4)

Purpose: To increase the subject's ability to deliver clear communication.

Result: The subject can communicate clearly, directly and emphatically.

Social situations require vastly different types of communication – from soft and empathetic to inviting or unassuming and even harsh. It is important to *be able to* deliver a direct communication without any added emotion or drama. This exercise trains the subject to be clear and straight in his communication. Direct and without any acting, drama or added emotions.

The subject may use the statements from a book like “Alice in Wonderland” to make the exercise more focused on delivering the communication rather than making up statements. The subject would read a statement from the book to himself, then look at the trainer and deliver it like it was his own. The trainer would correct the subject if he doesn't feel the subject really means it or delivers it unnaturally or not straight & direct.

8.5 Exercise 5 (X5)

Purpose: To train the subject's intention, resolve, focus and willpower.

Result: The subject can be fully focused with full intention even in difficult situations.

One way to train a person to become more focused and strong-willed is the infamous exercise of "shouting at an ashtray". Regardless of it seemingly silliness, the exercise does work remarkably well – if the trainer is skilled in coaching this exercise.

The subject sits in a chair facing another chair with an ashtray. The exercise is done in five steps:

1. Have the subject shout the following commands to the ashtray while he moves the ashtray with his hands: "Move up" (he then moves the ashtray up from the chair), "Thank you" (to acknowledge the action), "Move down" (he puts the ashtray back down) and "Thank you" once again. This is done until the trainer can see that the subject is emphatic and exhibits a strong intention and resolve.
2. The subject does as described above while the trainer tries to make him lose his focus. Just like in X2.
3. While in 1 and 2 above, the subject is made to use his voice as a vehicle or catalyst for focus and resolve, in this step he is to use a normal voice. He commands the ashtray with a normal voice level but with a strong resolve nevertheless. The trainer must watch carefully and correct any meekness or lack of focus. When this step is mastered, the trainer then tries to throw the subject's focus off as in X2.
4. At this step, the subject does the exercise silently. The trainer must be very alert and correct for any lack of focus and resolve. Mastering this, the X2 element is added.
5. The fifth and final step is done with the subject issuing wrong commands while keeping the right intention and subsequent motions. He would say "Thank you" while he intends for the ashtray to move up and say "Move down" while he intends the acknowledgement of "Thank you". Any combination works as long as the command is wrong and different from his intention. And as this is mastered, the trainer adds the X2 element of trying to throw off the subject's focus.

Number one above trains focus, intention and resolve. Number two trains the same but with external distractions. Number three trains the subject that resolve does not need any force or strain, while number four helps the subject realize that he can be resolute even without the aid of his voice at all. Number five trains the subject to understand that resolve can be completely separate from any physical aid.

9 Summary

While I have presented but a handful of useful tools in this article, there are plenty more that can be used for different people in different situations. But the main focus in my coaching is to maintain that the subject is senior to any method or tool. Keeping the coaching as simple as possible and fully tailored to the subject. Methods makes for easy product selling. Being focused on the subject and his or her unique needs takes another level of presence and focus from the trainer.

Many have asked for my advice on how to become a successful coach. Should they take a course? NLP, psychology, Scientology, various methods sold through books or online courses? My answer is much simpler.

Start helping people for free. Go to a random shopping mall, caf or public place. Approach a random person and ask if you can buy him a cup of coffee and if he has an hour to spare. Tell the person you will invest the next hour trying to help him – in any way you can – with no strings attached. You will not need to know the person's name or contact information. You ask nothing in return. Nothing at all.

If the person agrees, commence with helping the person during that one hour. Figure out something you can do to help him. When the hour is up, you're done.

If you have done a really good job, the person will ask if you can help him more. Then you say, "Yes I can help you another hour – but only if you help 5 other people just like I have now helped you. Five people, one hour each. When you have done that, you can get back to me. Here's my contact information".

If the person returns after helping five random people, give the person another hour of honest help. You will often find that the person will benefit more from helping others than from receiving your help. The same goes for you..

Help a few hundred people and you will become a good coach.