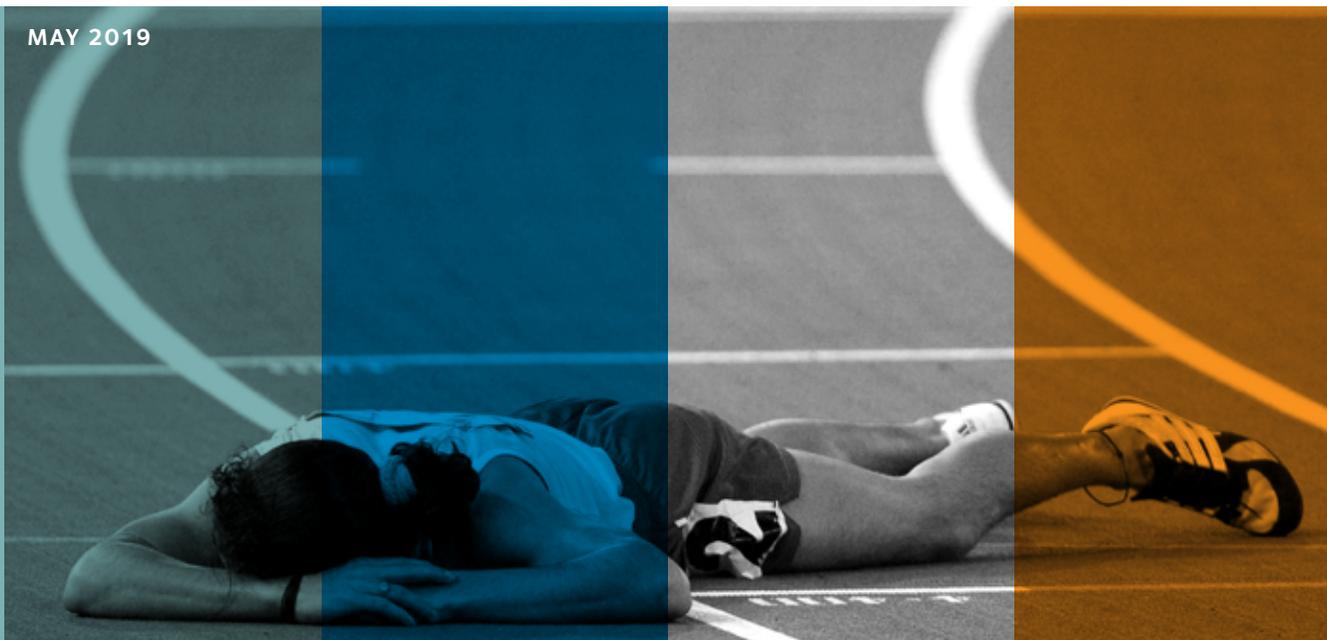


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Coaching through hard times:

The role of negative feelings in transcending personal missteps, disappointments and failures.

BY SANDRA STARK

Performance Coaching Founder Peter Jensen was working with a Canadian national team that regularly dominated the world scene in their sport.

Despite a long history of being the best, they were handed a devastating loss by their archrivals in an early game at the world championships. They felt like failures, with all the accompanying self-blame and loathing that can arise when things go wrong on such a big stage.

It was a short tournament and time was working against them. Just one more loss could spell disaster. The players and coaches knew they were in danger of veering off course and something had to be done. The question was what.

Our work at Performance Coaching often leads us into situations like international competitions where people experience psychological pain related to extreme disappointment and failure, but negative feelings aren't exclusive to world-class athletes and elite performers.

Most of us hold an idealized version of ourselves – a version of ourselves that we aspire to. When we are not living up to that ideal, we become dissatisfied with ourselves and our actions.

The 20th-century psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski would say we are caught in the internal conflict between “what is” and “what ought to be.” We know that we can be more, and

we experience pain – in the form of anxiety, doubt, fear, sadness, anger, jealousy, hopelessness, shame, and embarrassment, etc. – for not having acted or performed in alignment with our ideal self.

His contemporaries, Frankl, Jung and Assagioli, all posited that the “pain” Dabrowski described comes from our inability, in a given moment, to be aligned with higher values that call us to become more than we are. They argued that rather than trying to get rid of this pain we should look to its meaning and ask ourselves what potential it contains.

This “why” is not a psychoanalytic why that looks to a past cause, but one that reveals future possibilities. This attitude fosters transcendence, enabling the person to view their difficulties from a different, more inclusive perspective. As soon as we stop running from this discomfort and can look it in the face, transformation can begin. In short: crisis is an integral part of growth.

“A psychological truth is that trying to eliminate pain merely strengthens its hold. It is better to uncover its meaning, include it as an essential part of our purpose and embrace its potential to serve us.”

–Roberto Assagioli

When the people we coach are feeling embarrassment or disappointment our role is to help them step back and observe it. In other words, help them to disidentify from their “pain” rather than bury it, entrench it, or weaponize it to use against themselves or others. To do this, coaches must ask questions and make observations to help them see all of what is true; not just the little sliver of truth in which they are stuck.

When coaching or leading people who are experiencing negative feelings, especially about themselves, our role is to discern, and help our charges discern, what the feelings are signaling – what meaning they have – so they can transform them into something that serves their higher goals and aspirations as a person.

LET THE COACHING BEGIN

When the national team was in danger of spiraling, Peter used three tactics to help them transform their pain into fuel for better performance.

1. Acknowledge the pain and help them observe it

The morning after their big loss, the players stood in the lobby of their hotel looking like hell. When Peter asked them how they were feeling, the players answered with words like angry, embarrassed, awful, sad and anxious.

It would have been easy to discount their pain, but Peter just made an observation. “Yeah,” he said. “You look awful.”

When the strength coach said they would be heading to the field to do lunges, Peter asked the players, “how are you going to look doing lunges? How will your teammates know you are back?”

These are questions that lead to self observation rather than judging.

2. Move to compassion

Peter further helped the players observe themselves by asking one of the support staff to repeat a long story he had told at breakfast about buying a t-shirt; a story the players really weren’t in the mood to hear. After the story, Peter asked the players, “why did Ron buy that shirt?”

When a player finally answered that Rob had bought the shirt because he got a good deal, Peter explained the moral of the story: “Right. He wasn’t going to overpay. He knows what shirts are worth. You guys are overpaying right now.”

This was another reflective statement that asked the players to look at themselves. His statement didn’t contain any judgment; in fact, it was compassionate. He was engaging their capacity to observe themselves and presenting them with reflective statements they could chew on.

3. Identify the meaning of the pain

That afternoon they played another game against a much weaker team. They won 2-0. In the players’ minds, this lacklustre win was further proof that they were failing. Their perception was they should have walloped that team. They were spiraling down in spite of the win.

Later, at a team meeting, Peter asked each player to say what it meant to them to be on the team. The players said it meant everything to them. There were personal stories of family support, towns raising money, triumphs over injury, and pa-

triotism. More than a few tears were shed.

By doing this, Peter was helping them see the meaning of their pain. The team had failed to live up to their potential; do what they were capable of. With clarity on the pain's purpose, they could stop being the heckler in the crowd of their own performance and move toward what "ought to be".

Through the rest of the tournament, Peter kept the meaning of the pain alive for the players every time he talked with them.

At practice: "An American player woke up today and worked really hard in practice because they know they will be meeting you in the gold medal game. What are you going to do today in practice to show that you are back?"

With clarity on the pain's purpose, they could stop judging themselves and move toward what "ought to be".

In the weight room: "Remember what we learned after that loss. Remember, we are getting better every day. Can you improve 1% today? What are you doing to improve 1% today?"

This is a perfect example of what a coach does with negative feelings. A coach helps their charges figure out what it means to them – what the feelings signal about what they want to do differently.

By acknowledging their feelings and helping the players to observe themselves and identify the meaning of their pain, Peter was able to help the team transform their negative emotions into motivation to perform at the highest level. The team went undefeated for the rest of the tournament and persevered to win the gold medal – not despite their negative feelings, but because of them.

WHEN NEGATIVE FEELINGS BECOME A WEAPON

Some people weaponize these negative feelings and use them against themselves. When they judge their performance or behaviour as inappropriate or a failure, it becomes further proof to them of their unworthiness. They see it as a sign of their inadequacy as a human being – it is permanent, pervasive, and personal.

These reactions can also come from having an idealized version of what is good and right that is based on something unattainable – for example believing one can only be a good person if they are like Mandela or Gandhi. People believe they must win the gold medal at the Olympics or they will be a failure. They will judge themselves to be inferior in some way. They believe they don't have the stamina, morals, creativity, courage, brains, work ethic, discipline – whatever – to become what they believe, often unconsciously, to be a "worthwhile" person.

This is "the critic," a useless and destructive sub-personality that truly should be dismissed. When dealing with such thoughts, we as coaches need to help people correct their thinking and see all of what is true about themselves and their situation.

Like Peter with the national team, it is the coach's job to ask questions and make observations that help a person observe themselves in a non-judgemental way. The coach must help the person discern for themselves when they are using the negative feelings to put themselves down – attacking themselves – rather than using the pain to explore the conflict between what is and what ought to be.

DIRECTING OUR OWN DEVELOPMENT

A world championship provides an extreme example of negative feelings when failure occurs, but these kinds of setbacks happen to varying degrees in every setting. In business, negative emotions can come from an individual or team's failure to perform as expected. They can come from losing a big account, missing a major deadline, or saying the wrong thing.

Whatever the cause, as coaches we want to support our people's movement toward what ought to be; to help them rise above their current internal state and take charge of their development. We call this ability third factor: a skill that frees up our will, removing the control that negative feelings exert over our behaviour. When we acknowledge negative feelings without judgment, help people observe their discomfort and understand what is being signaled, we are developing their ability to direct their own development. This is what frees up their will to transcend instead of descend.

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