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Positive psychology techniques: active constructive responding

Article

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Positive psychology techniques – Active Constructive Responding

Abstract

This short article focuses on the skill of active constructive responding, a technique used when working within a positive psychology coaching framework. The paper offers a table that describes the behaviours, cognitions and emotions at six levels of listening. It offers a way to combine active listening with positive feedback responses to help demonstrate empathy and foster positive self-regard.

Key words:

Levels of listening**,** active listening**,** listening, active constructive responding, questioning and positive psychology coaching.

Active Constructive Responding

Active Constructive Responding (ACR) (Gable et al, 2004; Gable, Gonzaga & Strachman, 2006; Magyar-Moe, 2009) is a simple and understandable technique that can assist people improve their close relationships, by enabling (for example) coaches to respond more actively and constructively, observing and reflecting back when things go right for their coachees (Oades & Passmore, 2014).

The technique starts with the coach being focused and actively listening to the coachee's communciations at both the verbal and non-verbal level. The coach is specifically attuned to positive success, or moments of pride, which the coachee is seeking to share.

While listening is acknowledged as one of the key skills required of the coach, there has been relatively little written about active listening, when compared with the volume of work written about alternative coaching models. There are notable exception, for example, Gerald Egan (Egan 2009), Bill Miller and Steve Rollnick (Miller & Rollnick , 2013) and Nancy Klein (Klein, 1999). We suggest that when using ACR, the coach needs to listen at a deeper level , compared with traditionally listening in a normal conversation.

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We have tried to categorise listening into six levels. These styles of listening are illustrated in Table 1. We recognise this is just one way of categorising listening and the behaviours, emotions and cognitions described are typical rather than universal. As a result, not all individuals display all of the behaviours, cognitions or emotions described in the table.

Table 1: Six Levels of Listening

Level	**Typical coach behaviour**	**Typical coach cognition & emotions**
1. Ignoring	The coach does not maintain eye contact, but engages with their phone, looks out of the window or engages in another task.	The coach's thoughts are engaged on the other task.
2. Waitng my turn to talk	The coach may appear to be listening by making eye contact, nodding occasionally or gives verbal attentions. They may interrupt the speaker with the question they have formed.	The coach's thoughts are focused onsomething other than what the coachee is saying for example they may be preparing the words to use for their next question. The coach's emotions may be anxiety, in trying to get the words of their next question right or other emotions which are centred on their experience rather than the coachee.
3. Listening to the words	The coach makes eye contact, nods and gives verbal attentions to demonstrate listening. The coach may summarise what the coachee has said.	The coach's thought's are focused on the content of the words being used by the coachee.
4. Listening to words and body language (Active listening)	The coach is focused on the coachee. They use their eyes and ears to listen to what is being said in words and actions. The coach may summarise and reflect back their understanding of what they hear and see.	The coach's thoughts are on words and body language. The focus is still on the coach's emotional response rather than on the emotional experience of the coachee.

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5. Empathetic listening	The coach is wholly focused on the coachee – is listening with their eyes and ears. Based on the cognitions the coach may reflect back what they see or imagine is being felt in a sensitive appropriate way, avoiding labelling.	The coach is drawing on both their understanding of body language and emotions to make sense of what the coachee may be feeling and to image what feelings the coachee may be experiencing.
6. Active Constructive Listening (ACL)	In addition to actions in 4, the coach will be seeking to also constructively respond, by focusing on positive aspects to enhance pride, joy and self regard.	The coach is maintaining a positive mind frame of the individual and while using cognitions and emotions in 5, is activley seeking to particularly focus on the positive emotions.

Table two offers an illustration of ACR within a coaching conversation.

Table 2 : Active Constructive Responding: when coachee shares with their coach they have been promoted

Within 5 minutes into the coaching conversation John (coachee) tells Sue (coach) he has been promoted, he is very proud and excited of the opportunities it will bring"	Active Constructive	A common coach responses
	"I'm so pleased John. I am, really pleased because you have worked so hard over the past months, and you deserve this…well done….I'm so proud of you".	*"Good – you have been promoted…."* And / or *"What might this mean for you?"*

In the short example in Table 2 the coach, having listened to John's news, recognizes the importance of the message. Rather than simply acknowledging what has been said, the coach, using ACR, responds to the excitement in the voice tone and body language by providing positive feedback ('*I'm so pleased*'). This response is grounded, (supported by evidence), explaning why the coach shares this excitement (coachee's '*hard work'*). Thirdly, the coach's intervention is supported with attaching emotional content to the statement (*pride*). This makes the feedback

sound more authentic and more affirming for the coachee. It allows the coachee to rest for a moment in that success.

This intervention contrasts with the more traditional approach, taught within coaching, which is for the coach to respond by trying to move the coachee back towards the focus of the session. This commonly happens by the coach asking the follow up question; '*what does this mean to you*?' The emotion of sharing this experience is then lost, as the coachee returns to the work of the session, without having an opportunity, for a short moment, to dwell in their success.

The impact of this technque, when delivered well, is that it displays empathy towards the coachee, supporting the development of the coaching relationship, and secondly it fosters positive self-regard within the coachee.

Conclusion

This style of responding encourages the coach to adapt an explicitly positive stance towards their coachee through active listening and responding to what they have heard at the verbal and non-verbal level.

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