

# Is there a growing need for Relaxation Based Coaching?

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## **Abstract**

**With increasing rates of stress and anxiety in the general population, coaches and coaching psychologists are likely to see more coachees suffering from mild to severe levels of stress and clinical disorders. This article will consider if there a place in coaching and coaching psychology practice for straightforward relaxation techniques to reduce mild stress and anxiety.**

**Keywords:** *Relaxation Based Coaching, Mindfulness training, Relaxation, Relaxation training*

## **Introduction**

The United Kingdom's Health and Safety Executive (HSE, 2022) report that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the rate of self-reported work-related stress, anxiety and depression had indicated signs of increasing. The present rate is higher than the 2018/19 pre-COVID-19 levels. The Stress in America 2022 survey (APA, 2022) found that 27% of adults reported that most days they are so stressed they cannot function. Coaching has been shown to enhance goal attainment, resilience and workplace wellbeing, reduce depression and stress (eg Grant et al., 2009) so it could be one part of a comprehensive workplace stress management or prevention programme. There are numerous articles,

chapters and books on the different models and approaches used in coaching and coaching psychology practice (Whybrow & Palmer, 2019) and a number of them have research highlighting their effectiveness.

Mindfulness training has become a workplace intervention and a popular self-help technique to reduce stress and enhance wellbeing. It has been adapted to the field of coaching. For example, *Mindful Coaching* (Hall, 2013) and *Mindfulness based cognitive behavioural coaching* (Collard & McMahon, 2012). Concerns have been raised that practitioner psychologists may need additional training in the application of mindfulness with their client groups. The guide, *Mindfulness-based approaches: A guide for psychologists*, published online on the 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2022 by the British Psychological Society (BPS) cautions:

*“As with any psychological intervention, when making choices about mindfulness being involved in a piece of clinical work, an individual formulation is vital to the understanding, organisation and delivery of care to any client. How mindfulness is to be offered to any client needs to be part of a formulation rather than mindfulness as a prescribed global panacea. The formulation may suggest for the client that a publicly available mindfulness source (book or app) might be a good starting point for them before individual therapy in other cases, this might be totally inappropriate and even cause harm”* (BPS, 2022, p8).

Practitioner psychologists wishing to use mindfulness may possibly benefit from attending relevant continuing professional development (CPD) mindfulness

workshops or extended courses especially if the psychologist has received no formal training in developing a client ‘formulation’.

Could relatively simple relaxation techniques also provide another equally useful and effective alternative to mindfulness training?

### **Relaxation Based Coaching: Relaxation techniques**

The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health describe relaxation techniques as ‘practices to help bring about the body’s “relaxation response,” which is characterized by slower breathing, lower blood pressure, and a reduced heart rate. The relaxation response is the opposite of the stress response’ (NCCIH, 2021). By using relaxation techniques, a person can reduce stress and anxiety (eg Hopper, et al., 2019; Kim & Kim, 2018; Manzoni, et al., 2008). Relaxation interventions can also enhance self-efficacy for caregivers (Fisher & Laschinger, 2001). The application of easily available oximeters, blood pressure monitors and downloadable health phone apps can provide very useful and immediate biofeedback for clients and coachees as they can observe how quickly they can reduce the physiological measures of stress and anxiety through simple relaxation exercises.

Relaxation techniques and methods include Progressive Relaxation (Jacobson, 1939); The Relaxation Response (Benson, 1975); Simple Relaxation (Mitchell, 1977); Guided and Positive Relaxation Imagery (Palmer & Strickland, 1995); Multimodal Relaxation Method

(Palmer, 1993); The RE-LAX technique (Palmer, 2021); biofeedback-assisted relaxation, and breathing exercises or a combination of the aforementioned. These techniques can be demonstrated and recorded in a coaching session so that the coachee can practise daily at home or some other suitable location without the practitioner being present.

Similar to using other techniques, it is important that practitioners gain knowledge about the indications and contra-indications of using relaxation techniques as sometimes there can be negative responses such as relaxation induced panic attacks and other side-effects (see Adler et al., 1987; Heide & Borkovec, 1983; Lazarus & Mayne, 1990; Palmer, 1992). When and when not to use techniques is sometimes understated in coaching and coaching psychology training. This knowledge is particularly important when techniques such as mindfulness and relaxation are used as it could be argued that they go beyond standard 'talking' coaching skills. However, relaxation techniques are relatively easy to learn and apply. CPD and on-going supervision is recommended.

Returning to the issue regarding the concerns raised about the application of mindfulness and mindfulness-based approaches (BPS, 2022; Van Dam, 2018), in addition to appropriate training,

ongoing supervision of practitioners should address these issues. The BPS guide avoids being too prescriptive. It states that *'Individual psychologists are faced with a choice between having what can be an expensive training in mindfulness to be a certified practitioner of mindfulness or to make the best from the available literature and shorter courses. It is hoped that this document will help psychologists make informed choices about safe practice without being dogmatically prescriptive'* (BPS, 2022, p8). This document is a useful guide for research and practitioner psychologists and is currently freely available to download.

### **Is there a growing interest and need for Relaxation Based Coaching and Coaching Psychology?**

A recent coaching psychology CPD training event (Palmer & O'Riordan, 2022) highlighted the interest in relaxation-based coaching techniques and that they can be learnt fairly quickly by practitioners. If rates of stress and anxiety remain high, then we are likely to see a steady growth in the use of relaxation techniques in coaching and coaching psychology practice. The interest in time-limited or brief relaxation-based coaching or even brief relaxation based cognitive behavioural coaching is likely to increase too.

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## Biography

### Prof Stephen Palmer PhD FISCP

Prof Stephen Palmer PhD is Founder Director of the Centre for Stress Management which was launched in 1987. He is Professor of Practice at the Wales Academy for Professional Practice and Applied Research, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Adjunct Professor of Coaching Psychology, Aalborg University, Denmark, and Director of the National Academy of Coaching Psychology. His professional posts include being Honorary President of the International Society for Coaching Psychology. Stephen has written and edited 60 books including the *Handbook of Coaching Psychology (with Whybrow, 2019)* and *Introduction to Coaching Psychology (with O'Riordan, 2021)*. He co-edited a six volume set of books, *Psychological Stress, Resilience and Wellbeing (with Gyllensten, 2015)*. He has published over 300 articles.

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