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UN- speakables:

*Uncomfortable topics
we avoid that impact
coaching outcomes*

BEATING THE GREMLINS

How your inner critic affects your clients

By Paul Boehnke, PCC, ELI-MP

You are in a session with a client. You're just getting to the juicy part when they bring up a struggle they're experiencing – the very same issue you're dealing with right now. It's amazing how we attract clients we can help, but who also inadvertently help us. They so often remind us of the parts in our own life that need attention.

Of course, as coaches, we're trained to keep our agenda and our needs out of the conversation – to leave our stuff at the door and follow our client's agenda. But what if our agenda is secretly hidden behind all sorts of conscious and unconscious fears that steer us away from those things we're afraid of? And what if our clients say things that trigger these fears? Whose agenda are we likely following then?

GOING DEEP

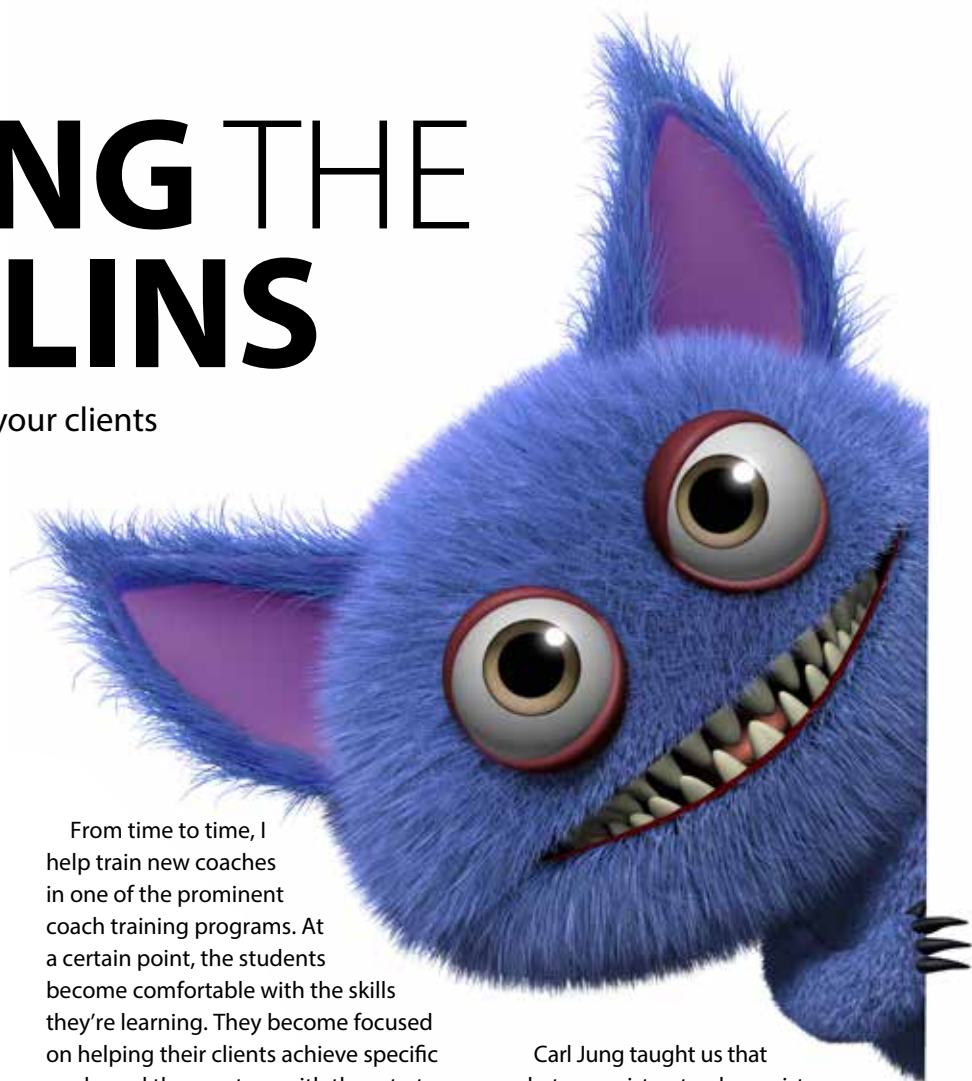
Our clients are dealing with both outer blocks (usually a lack of some sort of resource, such as time, money, training, etc.) and inner blocks (beliefs about the world and themselves that don't support them). The path to solving outer blocks tends to be fairly clear. But the reason people get stuck and have trouble solving the outer blocks is because the inner blocks are what's at the root of the issue.

Breaking through the inner block frees up the energy needed to solve the outer block. Breaking through the inner block means we're breaking down the beliefs our clients have about themselves, beliefs that live in the messages from their inner critic.

From time to time, I help train new coaches in one of the prominent coach training programs. At a certain point, the students become comfortable with the skills they're learning. They become focused on helping their clients achieve specific goals, and they partner with them to turn insights into action.

But as I observe them coaching their peers during live trainings, I see these same students so often steer clear of the inner blocks that go deep emotionally. They tell themselves they're not doing therapy – not to go too deep – to avoid opening a door they're not prepared to go through. But that's just the point. They're not prepared to go deep emotionally because often they've not gone there themselves, into the place their client is leading them.

Your inner critic, the voice in your head, your gremlins – whatever you call the part of you that tells you stories in order to keep you safe – has an amazing ability to direct you away from unknown, unfamiliar places. In my experience, the place it most wants to protect you from is the space of unexperienced emotion – a space that appears dark, dangerous, unpredictable, and is feared to be overwhelmingly powerful.



Carl Jung taught us that what we resist not only persists, but grows in size. When we avoid our own dark places, that avoidance seeps into all our relationships – including those with our clients – controlling where we can go and what we're able to look at or talk about. Our fear of those places prevents us from allowing our clients to go there.

This is how our own inner critic can affect our clients. If you're not comfortable with your own wounds or with feelings of anger, inadequacy, worthlessness, jealousy, rage, you unconsciously find ways to cleverly steer your clients clear of those emotions, too.

Your fear of your own feelings of worthlessness will be felt by your clients. They'll have the sense that examining these dark spaces isn't safe. When you neglect to deal with your own inner critic, it won't allow you to help your clients overcome their own inner critic.

You can see this in families, too. Parents who are unfamiliar and uncomfort-

able with particular emotions (usually it's anger, hurt, disappointment or sadness), do everything they can to move their children out of those uncomfortable emotions as fast as possible.

Although parents will say they want to protect their children and give them a happy life, the power of strong emotions they see in their children unconsciously terrifies them. They're unable to be with or hold a space for their kids to experience and release the emotion because they're unable to be there themselves.

This inability of parents with their children (and coaches with their clients) creates another cycle of wounding. It reinforces the idea that these emotions are indeed too dangerous.

But emotions are just emotions. It's pretty rare that anyone dies from experiencing an emotion. And like everything else in this world, emotions come and go.

Breaking through the inner block frees up the energy needed to solve the outer block.

There is nothing permanent about them.

In the hero's journey, going to the depths and slaying the dragon is what ultimately frees us. Going deep allows whatever is stuck or held prisoner to be released, liberating the energy that's been working so hard to keep us safe by holding things in place.

Experiencing our own emotions erases the fear of those emotions, and we discover that our fear of the emotion is much worse than the emotion itself. When we're free, we are no longer driven to avoid those emotions. We're able to hold a safe space for ourselves and for our clients. We may even discover that what was once so terrifying actually makes us feel more alive than ever.

What I love about the training program I'm associated with is that when the time is right, students are led through exercises that help them experience their own dark, shameful places. As they free up that stuck energy in themselves, they become able to follow their clients into their

own dark, shameful places so that their client's stuck energy is released.

WHAT IF THE PAST IS TRULY TRAUMATIC?

As coaches, we're not therapists. So how do we ensure we don't reactivate deep traumas our clients may have experienced – traumas that require specialized care? Ask your clients. If there are experiences that could overwhelm them by digging around, they'll tell you.

In one of my first sessions with a client, I was told that there were emotions she was not willing to experience. Although my curiosity was piqued, I honored her request and let her lead where she wanted to go. It turns out she was a survivor of incest. Fortunately, she was also working with a therapist who could help her through those issues.

Another client told me that though

they wanted to explore an event in their life, they didn't want to go too deep emotionally. Again, I let them lead and simply accompanied them on the path.

The key in both of these scenarios is that I'd done my own emotional work. I was comfortable with my own emotions. Consequently, I was able to hold whatever space my clients needed without pushing them into places they didn't want to go or steering them around where they did want to go.

HOW TO CONFRONT YOUR OWN INNER CRITIC

So how can you confront the fears of your own inner critic?

1 Get some support. Find someone comfortable enough with their own emotions to hold space for you. This could be a coach or a therapist.

2 Choose a process. There are lots of ways to subdue the negative effects of the inner critic. There's Chamine Shirzad's *Positive Intelligence*; Rick Carson's *Taming Your Gremlin*; the Hoffman Process; my own book, *Thoughts On Demand*; and countless other processes. They all have aspects to recommend them.

3 Be willing to venture into new territory, to get uncomfortable for a little while. Remember, emotions come and go. They don't stay permanently.

4 Allow yourself to really experience the emotions that have been hiding and to express what needs to be expressed. This is not an intellectual endeavor. It's an emotional one. Use your voice, your body. You can write, speak, dance, play music ... anything that helps you embody and experience your emotions. But do it all with an improvisatory approach. Express whatever comes up, when it comes up.

When you do this, you realize that instead of a dangerous place you might not survive, it's a place of healing. Joseph Campbell said that in mythology, change generally arrives as a monster, but leaves as an angel. Before the transformation, we naturally fear the unknown future. But once we've gone through the fire, we discover the journey was the gift of a lifetime. We come out the other side stronger, more compassionate, and more open and loving.

Our hidden agenda based on our fears evaporates, and we're able to accompany our clients where they need to go. •

