

Transpersonal Coaching for Highly Sensitive People: Exploring Self & Parts

What is a Transpersonal Approach to Coaching?

Transpersonal coaching is a relatively new modality in the field of coaching and stems from the paradigm of Transpersonal Psychology. It can be described as an integrative and holistic approach encompassing all levels of one's experience, including both conscious and subconscious phenomena. A coach working from a transpersonal perspective acknowledges there is a relationship between the psyche (mind), the body and the spirit and integrates the transpersonal or spiritual domain as well as one's personal psychology into the coaching process. Transpersonal coaching also presupposes a Self which is distinct from the ego and recognises that we are all on a psycho-spiritual journey of self-actualisation - moving towards greater wholeness. A transpersonal coach attempts to include rather than negate unexplained phenomena that can often be experienced on one's psycho-spiritual journey. Rather than pathologising specific 'symptoms', a transpersonal coach is attempting to uncover the potential meaning and purpose behind these experiences.

Open Awareness

A fundamental distinction can be made between transpersonal coaching and other types of coaching; in transpersonal coaching, the client and coach enter into more expansive states of consciousness through the technique of open awareness (Dangeli, 2022). This involves the coach and client opening the aperture of their awareness to hold space for themselves and others. This includes an awareness of the liminal space in-between and beyond oneself and the client. It's my experience that when both client and coach enter a shared, liminal space through the technique of open awareness, they are able to connect with the transpersonal, personal and interpersonal, as well as conscious and unconscious material. Open awareness enables both client and coach to access transpersonal insights as well as reach into the lower unconscious, where our individual and collective history and traumas are stored.

The Will and Self

Transpersonal coaching and the process of open awareness also involves the client and coach anchoring in one's Self and embodying pure self-awareness and Will. The Will relates to expressing who we are and how we can transform our purpose into action. The Self can be defined as an unchanging, stable centre (Assagioli, 1973). The Self is our being - who we are before and beyond any of our conditioning or wounding; our authentic soul nature. A transpersonal coach intends to bring an individual into closer alignment and relationship with their Self so that one can work with the contents of their ego. This is another difference between transpersonal coaching and other forms of coaching. More traditional forms of coaching or therapy are usually trying to work with 'egoic' issues from the same level of consciousness that they were created; therefore, only limited change can ensue. Our ego is aware of oneself, but without any expansion of consciousness (as occurs in open awareness), we find ourselves stuck in the same cycles of internal conflict, limiting beliefs and sabotaging behaviours.

When in alignment with Self, we are driven by the values of unconditional love, connection, compassion, empathy and presence, and we gain new perspectives on the struggles that are created and perpetuated within the constraints of our egoic parts. Therefore, transpersonal coaching is unique as it enables the client to transform the emerging parts of the ego from a more expansive state of consciousness.

Parts in Transpersonal Coaching

Transpersonal coaching recognises the presence of parts within the psyche. Parts are also described as subpersonalities and can be understood as constellated patterns of behaviours, thoughts, drives, attitudes and habits (Firman & Gila, 2022). It is commonly understood across various modalities that one's parts come into being for a reason. There will always be a higher intention or purpose to a part's behaviour, either to keep us safe or to help us actualise our potential. Even though the part has a positive intention, unfortunately, the part may not actually be behaving in a way that is in alignment with our authentic Self and may be limiting us from reaching wholeness and self-actualising.

Parts exist within the psyche and act autonomously with their own set of beliefs, thoughts, feelings and behaviours. William James (1842 – 1910) dealt with this concept, and he called parts ‘the various selves’ (Hutchins & James, 1952). Jung (1980) referred to the shadow, which consists of all the parts of us that we have disowned because we believe them to be unacceptable or are repressed to create a socially accepted sense of self - the persona. This concept of parts is also spoken about in indigenous and shamanic traditions, whereby rituals are carried out to engage in the retrieval of parts - what shamanic traditions understand as soul loss.

Parts and the Highly Sensitive Person

Highly Sensitive People (HSP) tend to have parts which take on more extreme roles or have a larger number of parts which have been pushed into the subconscious. There are two reasons for this; one relates to the fact HSP are so sensitive to their environment, and the impact of traumatic or difficult life events (especially in childhood) means they have a tendency to fracture or push parts of themselves that are carrying difficult emotions or experiences into the shadow. HSP are also very often shamed in childhood, so parts which carry beliefs such as being ‘too much’ or ‘too emotional’ are suppressed. HSP then have protective parts that work even harder to keep these difficult emotions at bay. For example, if a HSP is carrying a lot of shame surrounding their sensitivity, a protective ‘perfectionist’ part might become very extreme in an attempt to do everything perfectly and keep the shame suppressed in the shadow.

When coaching highly sensitive people, we endeavour to bring a client’s parts that may have been holding them back or sabotaging an alignment with their authentic nature into conscious awareness. As coaches, we will explore what beliefs, needs and values these parts are holding onto and how the part is attempting to meet its needs and values. Usually, we find the part is behaving in a way that isn’t supportive of one’s Self; however, the part (which is often younger in age) doesn’t have the same level of awareness to realise this truth. In a coaching session, we create space and a state of open awareness which enables clients to communicate with their parts and find a way to meet the part’s higher intention and needs but in ways which are ethical and in alignment with one’s authentic Self.

Working with our parts in this way is a catalyst for transformation on a micro and a macro level. This is because an embodied integration within oneself also enables integration and healing between oneself, others and the environment as a whole. From this perspective, transpersonal coaching is one of the few modalities that emphasises the importance of an ecological outcome and encourages eco-centred ways of being in the world instead of ego-centred (Dangeli, 2022).

Our parts are often hidden within the unconscious, and in transpersonal coaching, we engage with these parts, which often emerge viscerally through somatic sensation within the body or through imagery that is more readily accessed in the state of open awareness. An initial step is to identify the somatic manifestation of that part within the body and to visualise its form. From here, we get to know this part by discovering why it is here and what its intention is. Contrary to what one usually wants to do with a 'disowned' part of themselves, we invite the part into conscious awareness through an empathetic and compassionate dialogue. Through open awareness, we work with the part to meet its needs and explore the possibility of the part taking on new behaviours that are in alignment with oneself and ethical to others and the world. What I've experienced within transpersonal coaching sessions is that the client's part will organically (when met with the authentic Self) find a new, more aligned and ethical way in which to meet its needs and values. The original image or sensation within the body will evolve and transform in light of the process.

I have experienced that working with one's parts in this way, within the framework of transpersonal coaching, is crucial and one of the most beneficial ways for clients to embody and integrate their healing and transformation. Clients can work to integrate their new insights beyond the coaching session because they have been actively engaged in the coaching process, they are able to access open awareness in their own time - it's not something that's dependent on the coach. Also, they are encouraged to continue this compassionate dialogue with their parts beyond the scope of the coaching session, thus supporting their integration and a prolonged ability to embody an expansive and coherent sense of Self.

References

Assagioli, R. (1974). *The act of will*. Penguin Books.

Dangeli, J. (2022). *Transpersonal Coaching Handbook* (3rd ed.).

Firman, J., & Gila, A. (2002). *Psychosynthesis a psychology of the spirit*. State University of New York Press.

Hutchins, R. M., & James, W. (1952). *William James: The principles of psychology*. William Benton, publisher.

Jung, C. G. (1980). *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.