

When Coaching Clients Experience Tragedy: Avoiding the Drama of Trauma

- How do you deal with a client who has experienced a life-altering trauma and maintain your coaching role? **Patrick Williams**, Ed.D., MCC, shares his experience and the reasons why this is so important.

“Hi, Pat.”

“Hello, Carol. I got your email that said you had a tragedy in your life and really needed to talk to me today. How are you? What’s happened?”

“Well, Dr. Pat, it’s Brian, my son. He was killed yesterday in a car crash.”

Suddenly, career change doesn’t seem so important.

I had been coaching Carol for more than two years at that point. She was a great client, and we’d done some good work in the process of our coach/client relationship. But in that one moment on the phone, I knew that everything we’d worked on up to that point would need to take a back seat to what was happening now. Our whole relationship could turn on how I handled this challenge.

I’ve always said that life happens in between coaching calls. Well, now one of the worst possible things that could happen had just occurred in my client’s life. This is the very definition of an “acute traumatic occurrence.” As a man with children of my own, my heart broke for her, and as a coach, I knew this would test my mettle. How do I remain effective as a coach when a client experiences this type of acute trauma? The answer, as I discovered in working with Carol and other clients, and in talking with other coaches, is threefold:

1. Understand our role, and the role of coaching, in the lives of our clients during these kinds of crises.
2. Become aware of the effect of client crises on us, both as human beings and as coaches, and get support around that.
3. Continue to be good coaches and roll with what life throws our clients and us.

Understanding the role of a coach means remembering what coaching is and what it isn’t. It is not ministry or therapy or healing. A minister’s role is to provide spiritual guidance; a therapist’s role is to explore, dissect, and work through emotions. It is not a coach’s role to do any of these. Coaching doesn’t focus on feelings; it doesn’t delve into them to try to understand and explore them. It does, however, acknowledge emotions, especially in a crisis situation.

An effective coach focuses on normalizing and putting into context the feelings that a client experiences in response to traumatic life events. Feelings come up — we’re human, it’s natural. But the coach needs to first contextualize the feelings being experienced. This means helping the client view his or her reaction and feelings within the context of what

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has occurred. A person who loses a child or experiences divorce is going to be sad, grief stricken, angry, hurt, and so on. There is nothing pathological about that, just as feeling joy at winning the lottery or having a new baby is in no way “inappropriate.”

Normalizing those feelings means understanding that they are normal and reasonable, and not minimizing them. The role of a coach is to acknowledge the person’s feelings, empathize with them, and seek to understand them.

Of course, we’re human — we all have feelings. And it’s likely that over the course of our relationship with our client, we’ve developed feelings for him or her. Probably one of the most important qualities of a good coach is to be empathic. When someone we know, care for, and have a lot invested in suffers trauma in his or her life, it’s going to spill over into our life. This, too, is natural and normal, and it’s something that we as coaches need to strengthen ourselves to face and handle well.

Feelings can’t be ignored — neither our client’s nor ours. As coaches, we need to be aware of our emotional reactions and how those reactions might be affecting a client. Are we getting hooked by something a client is going through? It might be that the trauma a client is experiencing is very close to one in our own life and we’re having trouble distancing ourselves from it. Or it could simply be that we are emotionally invested in this client and his or her life, which triggers normal, natural sadness. But when that sadness overwhelms us or causes us to shut down and distance ourselves from the client, it must be addressed.

It is crucial that we be aware of our reactions and take the necessary steps to get the support and coaching we need in the context of this trauma. Both the client and we can best be served when we as the coach gain some perspective. As coaches, we are often in coaching relationships ourselves, or have trusted, experienced mentors or fellow coaches we can turn to for support. Getting support from a coach or a trusted colleague is an important and helpful strategy when a client’s trauma triggers strong feelings in us. Those feelings are normal but not necessarily common, and we all can use a bit of perspective and support in dealing with them when they arise in the context of working with a client.

We may find that we are unable to deal with what’s going on. In the odd situation when something that has happened to a client brings up a past trauma of our own that renders

Coaching in the Context of a Client’s Trauma

Conceptualize and normalize.

The emotions the client is feeling are normal, reasonable, and appropriate, and it’s important for our coaching to be guided by this fact. But our role is not to dissect or inspect emotional reactions, since we are not therapists or ministers. A coach focuses on the client’s current needs and how the coach can be most helpful or can offer the greatest assistance.

Quarterback referrals. A coach should act as a quarterback for referrals, coaching the client on how to get the help he or she needs. If the client needs therapy, spiritual guidance, or just someone to do the laundry or take care of the children, the coach helps with identifying the need and strategizing about how to meet that need. This doesn’t differ significantly from what we do in times of regular coaching. Through “powerful questioning,” we help our client to identify the outside help needed and how to ask for that help. Whether it’s a career change or a life trauma, the method is the same: “What do you need, and where can you get it?”

Be aware. At a time of a client’s highest stress and emotional reactions, we need to be aware both of what he or she is going through and what we’re going through. It’s up to us to anchor ourselves in good coaching practice and to provide true value for the client.

Normalize emotions. We need to keep in mind that strong emotional reactions to traumatic events are normal and natural. A client may need other services, but we can still be an effective coach. We are important in our clients’ lives.

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therapy alliance

us ineffective as a coach, it may be necessary to tell the client that we can't be as effective as we need to be because we're getting hooked. But we must remain a good coach even in that context and not abandon the client. We can explain to the client what's going on while at the same time staying true to our role as a professional. The client needs and deserves our support, and our appropriate role is to ask how best to coach the client in the moment.

In short, as coaches we need to be sufficiently self-aware to deal with the reactions we're going to have. In regular coaching, as well as in traumatic situations, we're going to have emotional reactions — we are going to get hooked from time to time. The best response is to have the support necessary to deal with it and remain effective. At the end of the day, the coach must remain a good coach. Priorities may change, and the goals the client is working toward may get pushed aside, but the coach must be able to roll with the punches. ●

Trauma, Drama or Just Plain Chaos?

In some situations, we're not actually dealing with trauma, but merely the "drama" that some people pull into their lives regularly. It's trauma if it's acute, recent, and immediate. Anything that is life altering and close to your client is trauma.

Some people create drama or chaos in their lives. We've known people like this in our lives and in our coaching practices. They create chaos and try to enroll others in reacting to it because it supports their view of themselves as victims or at least as helpless to change their lives. Here's how to deal with them:

Figure it out early. The longer you go on letting them enroll you, the harder it becomes to break the habit.

Watch your reactions. If you finish a call drained or frustrated, something is wrong. Check with your own coach — you may be dealing with a "drama queen or king."

Turn it back on them. Remind them of the ways in which coaching can be effective, and let them know that listening to dramatic stories is not one of those ways.

Ask them what they want out of coaching.

Have a courageous conversation. None of us wants to terminate a paying client, but in some cases that may be the only route.

Dr. Patrick Williams, Ed. D., MCC, is co-author, with Deborah C. Davis, of *Therapist as Life Coach: Transforming Your Practice* (W.W. Norton & Company).