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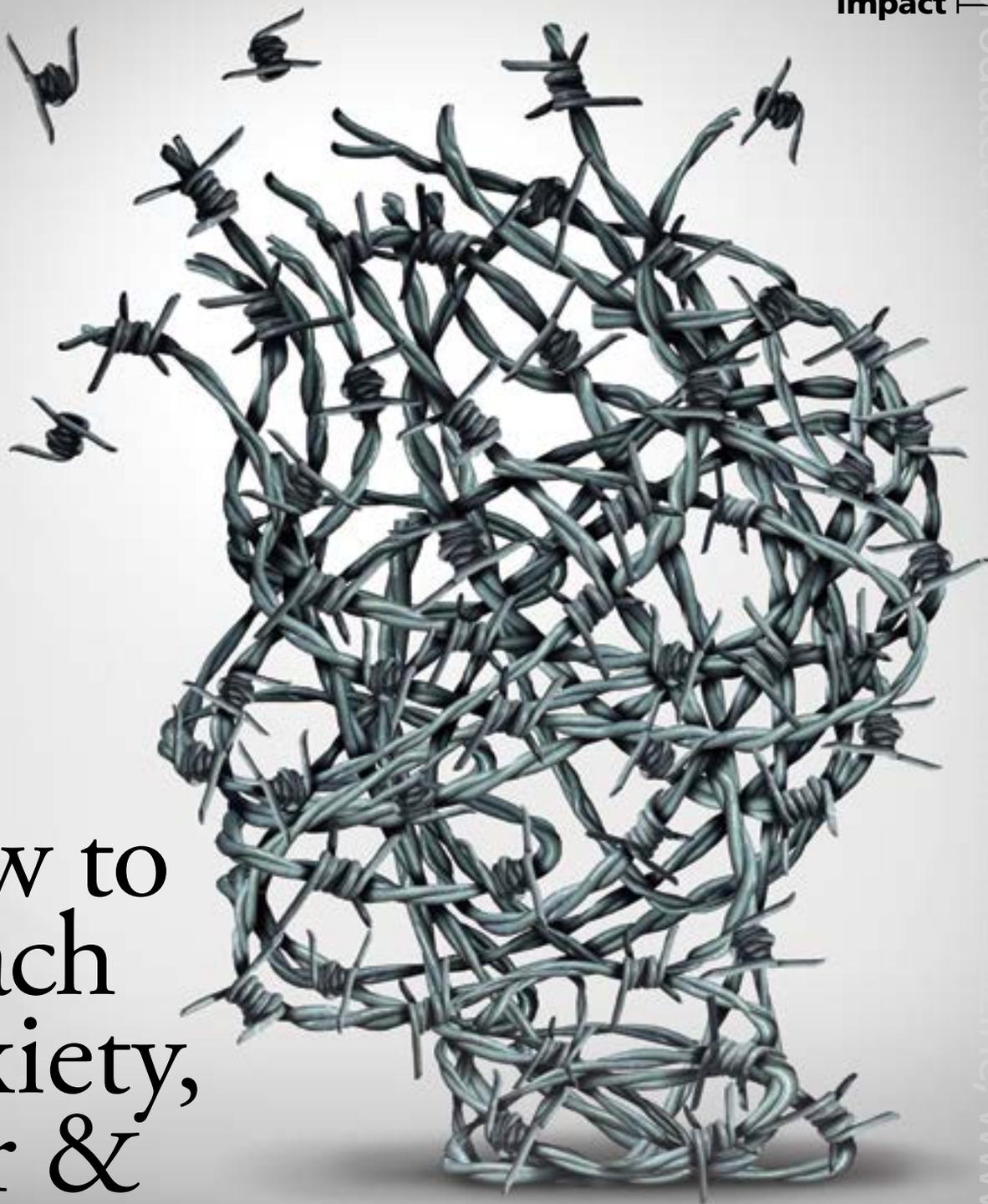
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How coaching transforms
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How to Coach Anxiety, Fear & Stress

Helping clients navigate uncomfortable thoughts, feelings and sensations

By Julian Humphreys PhD, PCC, CPCC

Although the words anxiety, fear and stress are often used interchangeably, they are experientially different, with implications for how we characterize and coach our clients. In this article, I highlight the differences between anxiety, fear and stress, and show how coaches can work with all three to more effectively address client concerns.

impact

THE DIFFERENCE

As the graphic at right illustrates, anxiety, fear and stress differ with respect to threat imminence, from more distant to more proximate.

- **Anxiety** results from the perception of an **amorphous, long-term threat**.
- **Fear** results from the perception of an **identifiable, impending threat**.
- **Stress** results from the perception of a **keenly felt, immediate threat**.

The subjective experience of anxiety, fear and stress is also different:

- **Anxiety:** a lingering unconscious awareness causing restlessness, sleeplessness, trouble concentrating.
- **Fear:** a recurring emotion causing mental chatter, confusion, butterflies in stomach.
- **Stress:** an involuntary response causing elevated heart rate, sweaty palms, out of body experience.

Anxiety, fear and stress also differ with respect to outcome.

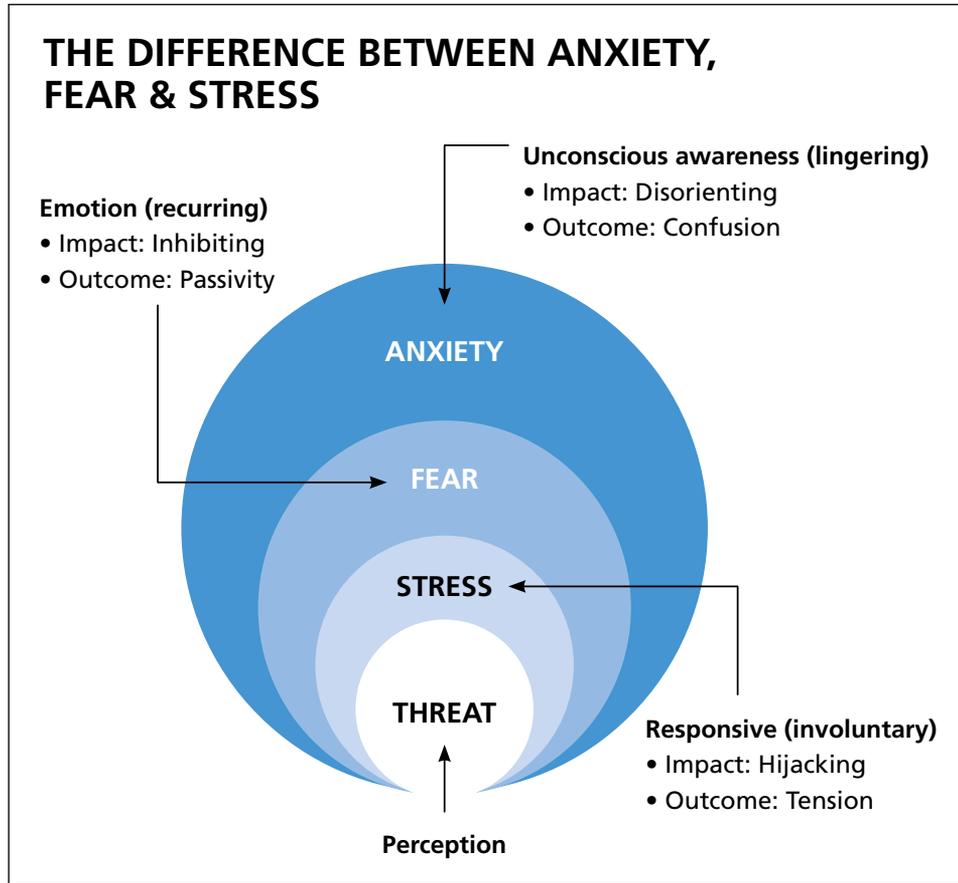
Experience	Anxiety	Fear	Stress
Threat Imminence	Distant	Impending	Immediate
Outcome	"I don't know what to do"	"I know what to do, but I don't want to do it"	"I'm doing it (and I wish I wasn't)"

When resolved successfully, anxiety, fear and stress follow sequentially, as illustrated in the graphic at right.

The challenges are anxiety, fear and stress. The solutions are creativity, will and body awareness, and the outcomes are planning, action and performance.

Here's an example of how this works: John is a new VP of Marketing in a large public relations firm. Since being promoted he has suffered sleepless nights amid a growing sense that he is not performing as well as expected. He has taken to staying late at the office to prove his

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ANXIETY, FEAR & STRESS



commitment, and is demanding more from his direct reports. But now his direct reports seem increasingly unhappy, to the point that he feels stuck between a rock and a hard place. Either he satisfies his boss's expectations, and drives his team hard, or he satisfies his team and disappoints his boss. He doesn't know what to do. **This is anxiety.**

Quite by accident, John hears about an executive coach and thinks maybe that's what he needs. He talks with a couple of coaches and decides that what he needs is a 360 assessment so he can get feedback from the people he works with and know where he stands. **John has been creative with respect to his anxiety and has settled on a plan.**

John hires the coach and they agree on a process that includes a 360 and other assessments. Although on the one hand John wants feedback from his team, on the other hand he is scared of what he might discover, so he drags his feet and fails to invite his colleagues to participate in the 360-assessment in a timely manner. **This is fear.**

Eventually, he forces himself to send the invite, despite his concerns, and the 360-assessment process is initiated. **John has exercised his will to overcome fear and move into action.**

Three weeks later, John meets with his coach. The results of his assessment are in, and John is eager for the results. As his coach explains how the debrief of the assessment will work, John can barely focus on what his coach is saying. He just wants the results. His heart is beating fast, and his hands are sweaty. **This is stress.**

John recognizes that his body is in a state of high arousal, and he takes deep breaths to calm himself. He notices that as a result of doing so he is better able to concentrate on what his coach is saying, and feels confident that no matter what the results of the assessment, he will grow to be a better leader as a result. **John has brought awareness to his body and is now in a better position to perform in his role as coachee.**

WORKING WITH ANXIETY, FEAR & STRESS

Because anxiety, fear and stress each have their own unique challenges and solutions, it's important for coaches to recognize these different experiences in their clients so they can better support their progress.

Experience	Anxiety	Fear	Stress
Characteristics	Distant	Passivity	Tension
Coaching Skills	holding space, being with difficult thoughts and emotions	acknowledging, championing, holding accountable	mindfulness, breathing, relaxation techniques
Resulting in more	Creativity	Will	Awareness

While coaches are, for the most part, comfortable coaching fear and stress, many coaches see anxiety as

outside their area of expertise. This is unfortunate, as not all anxiety is pathological. Many clients who are currently labeled 'uncoachable' because they can't settle on a viable change project are simply in the anxious phase of the process outlined above. So long as the coach takes the time to slow down and be with clients as they struggle to land upon a viable change project, there is no reason to refer anxious clients to therapists.

“Coaches who understand anxiety are in a position to redefine coaching to include the messy work of figuring out what the next phase of the client's growth is.”

Coaches who understand anxiety are in a position to redefine coaching to include the messy work of figuring out what the next phase of the client's growth is. They are able to put their own need for a viable change project aside, at least temporarily, to hold a space for clients as they struggle with uncomfortable thoughts, feelings and sensations.

If coaches can build their clients' creative and interpretive capacity as they struggle with anxiety, a new change project will likely be born. That project will then evolve to elicit the fear and stress responses that are the bread and butter of many coaching engagements.

If coaches are truly in the business of supporting change projects, they need to be there not just during the growth and evolution stage of a change project, but during the inception stage, too. •

