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The Compassionate Coach: From Empathy to Compassion (Part 1 of 2) by NADEGE ESTEBAN-FRUTOS

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Empathy means: "putting yourself in the other person's shoes" or "seeing things through someone else's eyes." As a coach, undoubtedly, empathy helps us to build a deep, trustful and safe connection with our coachee. By sharpening our 'people acumen', it also allows us to understand and be attuned to others' feeling and thinking.

"Empathy is the oil that keeps relationships running smoothly" (Bruna Martinuzzi). Yes, empathy is important in our life and in our coaching practices, but "there is a downside of empathy when it comes to the suffering of others. When we share the suffering of others too much, our negative emotions increase. It carries the danger of an emotional burnout." (Olga Klimecki¹) I can easily relate to that: I started my career as a physical education and

sport teacher with special needs children. Everyday being with kids who were suffering has helped me to develop the areas in my brain related to empathy (yes it is related with your brain!). But I was so implicated physically, emotionally and mentally that it has also lead me to emotional burnout, stress and I finally changed my career plan. And, I'm not the only to be or have been trapped by too much empathy. For example, healthcare workers are also at risk to develop the same symptoms – stress, feeling overwhelmed and burn out – when facing trauma victims. And it could be the same for you as a coach... why? According to one study², researchers found that similar areas of the brain are activated both in the person who suffers and the one who feels empathy. In other words, as an empathetic coach, we directly experience that suffering. So, if the coachee feels sad, it will trigger the 'sadness' neural circuitry in our brain and that will make us feel sad. If that becomes too much, we can feel overwhelmed and even trapped in that feeling. And if you are not aware of that, it can leads to mental and emotional issues, and of course, you cannot get enough clarity to help effectively the coachee.

Whereas, in compassion, you also feel what the other feels but you are not overwhelmed by it because compassion doesn't trigger the same neural connexion in your brain. Compassion triggers the positive parts of your brain and by this way helps you to cope better with the distress of others

Concretely, when feeling compassion for the coachees, we understand their feelings, we do not necessarily feel their pain, but we feel concern and, fueled by a feeling of warmth and care, we are motivated to help them.

This discovery has a huge implication in all the helping professions: coach, teachers, trainers, doctors, therapists etc. And the good news is: Compassion is a trainable skills!

Stay tuned... In my next post, I will discuss further the ways we can develop our compassion skills!

[<Click here for part 2/2>](#)

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