

Alberta Doctors' Digest

I was wrong, I need help, and Worcestershire sauce

Early in the pandemic, I drove by a local church sign that stated: “The three hardest things to say in life are, ‘I was wrong, I need help, and Worcestershire sauce’.”

That quip encapsulated my life at that moment. The pandemic had just hit us, and many of us were dealing with pre-existing health and/or family stressors. There was also the mounting pressure of working in a health care system heading towards crisis. And I was struggling with the impact of overnight calls that were compounding the toll on my mental and physical health.

Around this time, our department offered a series of virtual group coaching sessions led by a physician colleague trained as an executive coach. This was my first experience with executive coaching. I recall the first question that we were asked to reflect on: “What are you grateful for?” My inner critic was saying, “Well this is going to be a kumbaya waste of time.” However, by the end of the first session, I was pleasantly surprised at how effective it was for me. This process created an opportunity for us to be in a safe space together where we could be vulnerable and truly connect to ourselves and each other on a meaningful level. The questions our coach posed challenged us to think beyond the what and into the why – questions that we rarely explore or reflect on during the usual collegial chats. The questions posed by our coach led me to a deeper understanding of myself. Connecting with others validated my own personal struggles and gave me the increased self-confidence and sense of self-worth to ask for help.

I previously understood the value of having a family physician and a PFSP counselor; now I realized there was another valuable source of support. I hired a physician coach to explore how I might make a shift that would bring more fulfillment to my life. The coaching techniques that my physician coach is skilled in are the same techniques used for high performance athletes and corporate executives to achieve excellence in their professions.

Coaching is distinct from therapy. The International Coaching Federation makes the distinction as follows: “Therapy deals with healing pain, dysfunction, and conflict within an individual or in relationships. Coaching, on the other hand, supports personal and professional growth based on self-initiated change in pursuit of specific actionable outcomes.”

In other words, coaching is a framework for self-exploration of personal identity, purpose, meaning, skills, capabilities, and even potential blind spots. Before coaching, I felt like I was hiking in the dark, trying to find the trail without a head lamp. My personal experience with coaching provided the head lamp I needed to illuminate the trails or options in front of me. This re-ignited my passion. Through coaching, I came to a deeper understanding of my why and the source of my motivations in my professional and personal life. Coaching was also helpful with issues such as imposter syndrome, work relationships, confidence, leadership effectiveness and clarity of purpose, to name a few. If you're the kind of person who prefers empirical data over anecdotal evidence, see the resources below.

Ultimately, I became a certified executive coach in 2022. Being coached and coaching others has benefitted me in many ways personally, for example, with my listening skills (ask my husband about this) and with personal relationships. In addition, I feel my motivational interviewing approach with teen patients and their families has transformed in a positive way. I'm able to establish rapport and get at meaningful and emotional topics more effectively and consistently. This has contributed to even more fulfilling interactions with my patients than I thought were possible. I have been able to make subtle reframes in my mindset that have added up to more professional fulfillment. "I *want* to see and help patients today in clinic" instead of "I'm *dreading* going into work today." My mindset has shifted in a way that enables me to know and be aligned with my values.

I hope my story gives you hope and curiosity to look inward for self-awareness and an open mind that coaching is an additional tool that is different from counselling or peer support – one that may help you achieve greater professional and personal fulfillment.

Coaching has highlighted the personal empowerment of admitting when I am wrong and asking for help. And I am proud to report that after repeated practice, I can now pronounce Worcestershire sauce.

Notes

- This article is dedicated to the memory of my late colleague Dr. Warren Yunker.
- PFSP offers support for your mental health via peer support and/or provision of funded sessions with a qualified therapist. It's never too early or too late to call the 24/7/365 Assistance Line @ 1-877-767-4637.
- Executive coaching is not provided through PFSP.

Resources provided by the author

- Fainstad T, Mann A, Suresh K, Shah P, Dieujuste N, Thurmon K, Jones CD. Effect of a Novel Online Group-Coaching Program to Reduce Burnout in Female Resident Physicians: A Randomized Clinical Trial. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2022 May 2;5(5):e2210752. doi: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.10752. Erratum in: *JAMA Netw Open*. 2022 Jun 1;5(6):e2220348. PMID: 35522281; PMCID: PMC9077483.
- Dyrbye LN, Shanafelt TD, Gill PR, Satele DV, West CP. Effect of a Professional Coaching Intervention on the Well-being and Distress of Physicians: A Pilot Randomized Clinical Trial. *JAMA Intern Med*. 2019 Oct 1;179(10):1406-1414. doi: 10.1001/jamainternmed.2019.2425. PMID: 31380892; PMCID: PMC6686971.
- Palamara K, Kauffman C, Stone V, et al. Promoting success: a professional development coaching program for interns in medicine. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*. 2015;7(4):630-637.
- [The International Coaching Federation \(ICF\)](#)
- [ICF Calgary Chapter](#)
- [ICF Edmonton Chapter](#)
- [Canadian Physician Coaches Network](#)