

As its Mental Health Awareness week and the theme is nature, I wanted to share some of my experience and knowledge as a professional coach and mental health first aider who practices outdoor coaching.

I have been coaching outdoors for two years in the Derbyshire Dales close to the Peak District National Park, giving me access to some of the UK's most stunning countryside. Coaching outdoors takes clients away from life and work distractions and gives them space to think and gain a new perspective. I work with clients 1:1 walking along side them, supporting their thoughts in a creative natural space which allows time for thinking, exploring, and reflecting. It allows clients to consider challenges, goals or simply stand back and reflect.

Walking side by side creates an open, relaxed atmosphere with the natural world stretched out in front of both of you, helping to feel you are journeying together with connection. For those facing challenges it can feel more supportive and less scrutinised as eye contact is less. Interestingly my experience here is that when the client does make eye contact its more purposeful and can be more intense. Equally the silences can be more comfortable, it's very natural to walk for a while without having to say something. Nature fills the void which is nurturing and secure and offers support to the process.

Further learning shows me that coaching in nature is more expansive for the mind, physically you can allow your client space. At times I have slowed down and left my client to walk or sit on their own for a short while, giving space to clarify or explore new thinking.

Watching pace and the somatic element of coaching outdoors is incredible, I have one client who will not stop walking or sit for the whole session. The act of walking is like a metronome to his thinking as he plays through his life and challenges. Its easy to see through pace when someone is energised, anxious and when the world is heavy upon their shoulders, I simply walk with them and notice and evoke awareness as required. The walks are bespoke and always tailored to the clients needs and ability, so some can be park walks, or some are in the hills. Some clients even bring along their dog, I mirror this with their permission by bringing along my dog, this can be very therapeutic and natural for the client having a trusted friend come along helping to relax them as they explore thoughts.

The natural environment can be especially useful in a coaching context, my experience shows that I am able to evoke new ways to self-awareness by using trees, paths, and water as a metaphor. You can simply look at the ground for detail or investigate the horizon for more expansive thinking. Equally I have clients who love walking in the rain or snow, experiencing the elements can help you to feel alive and reconnected to the ultimate systemic world of nature, the earth and beyond, or connect you to old emotions which may surface.

Being in nature is hugely powerful for me and connects me to many happy childhood memories, it has helped me deal with difficult times in my life and still helps me to de-stress and cope with the strains and demands of life today!

As we begin to re-engage with the world post pandemic, I believe coaching outdoors and supporting good wellbeing has a huge part to play in supporting social prescribing and allowing people to gain help in dealing with stress and mental health challenges.

If you would like to know more or want to give it a go, please contact me at paul@pebbleassociates.co.uk to explore. There are increasingly more professionally accredited

coaches taking their practices outdoors so hopefully more support will become available for this rich supportive practice helping mind and body.