

BRAIN CHEMISTRY • INTUITIVE DUALISM • NEURO-HYPE • SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

choice

the magazine of professional coaching

NEUROSCIENCE & COACHING:

*Separating myth
from reality*

VOLUME 21 • NUMBER 4
choice-online.com

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Neuroscience & Coaching

SEPARATING MYTHS
FROM REALITY

What's the truth about neuroscience and coaching? What are the biggest neuromyths? How do you coach neurodiverse clients? What has changed in neuroscience and coaching with the new understanding of the brain? What is the future of coaching as it relates to neuroscience? Join us as we explore how the latest science of the brain impacts our profession.



“Wisdom isn’t knowing more. It’s knowing with more of yourself.”

— Cynthia Bourgeault

In 1991, a philosopher, a biologist and a psychologist teamed up to write *The Embodied Mind*, an investigation into the nature of embodied cognition. In the decades since, the ideas that authors Francisco Varela, Eleanor Rosch and Evan Thompson explored at the intersection of cognitive science, human experience and Buddhist philosophy have gone on to influence hundreds of researchers in dozens of fields.

Sports, robotics, linguistics, anthropology, biology and even physics have taken cues from this distinguished and now classic book.

It’s time for coaching to catch up.

Recent research¹ indicates that an embodied approach to coaching has powerful effects on required skills for the 21st century – learnable social and emotional intelligence competencies such as resilience, adaptability, empathy, conflict management, and more. In fact, embodied coaching methods have been shown to be as much as 4 times as effective as yoga, mindfulness, and other mind-body modalities in developing these sorts of skills.

That sounds pretty impressive, but maybe also a bit suspicious. After all, it’s already been clearly established that yoga and mindfulness are both powerful approaches to improving health and performance in a number of ways. So what is embodied coaching, exactly? Why is it so effective? And most importantly... how do we make use of it?

4E COGNITION

Fundamentally, cognition is about gathering information to guide behavior. As coaches, it is our responsibility to help clients find and choose the most empowered actions to help them move towards their goals. In other

APPLIED EMBODIED COGNITION FOR COACHES

Why embodied coaching beats yoga and mindfulness

By Amanda Blake, PhD

words, helping clients gather information to guide their behavior is pretty much the basic job description of a coach. So we'd better understand how cognition works.

Colloquially, people tend to think about the word "cognition" as equivalent to "thinking," associating it with the running internal narrative that accompanies us throughout our days. But the *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines cognition as "the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge or understanding through thought, experience, and the senses." Notably, the very concept of cognition includes experience and sensory perception as core constituents. So right from the very definition of the term, we can consider cognition to be embodied.

Over the past century, cognitive science has been through three major stages, closely tracking the evolution of computer science. Let's take a look at how our current understanding of the neurobiology of cognition has the potential to revolutionize coaching as we know it.

ERA 1: REPRESENTATION AND COMPUTATION

In the 1940s and '50s, as the power of new computing machines captured people's imaginations, new ideas about

decision-making, language acquisition, perception and more made their way into studies of the brain. Brain researchers relied on a representation-and-computation model of the brain that many of us may have learned in high school biology: when you see a flower, your brain makes a mini upside-down "representation" of it, and then computes what to do with it. That is more or less correct, insofar as it goes.

ERA 2: NEURAL NETWORKS

In the 1980s and '90s, as the sophistication of both computers and brain imaging tools advanced, we entered the era of the internet. Previously rare and specialized computer networks expanded beyond their experimental roots to enter the mainstream. As we started sending email and posting on chat boards, it wasn't long before the metaphor of brain-as-network emerged.

By the end of the 20th century, the network model of cognition had fully taken hold, substantially overshadowing – though not replacing – the representational model.

ERA 3: 4E COGNITION

With the publication of *The Embodied Mind*, Varela, Rosch and Thompson issued a direct challenge to the representational model of the brain. They argued that, rather than representing an independent, outside, pre-given world, cognition is more accurately described as the emergence of the world through ongoing embodied perception, experience and action.

For instance, the red of an apple is not exclusively the product of the apple – it is also a product of your seeing. The perception and idea of "apple" occurs via an interactive process between your eye, your brain, the apple, the light striking it, and even your cultural context (it looks delicious, or like a witch's poison, or like the forbidden fruit).

Building on this framework, cognitive science researchers have more recently proposed that cognition is unavoidably contextualized. The brain is nested inside of a body that is nested in a par-

ticular environment, and each of these inseparable elements plays a critical role in cognition. Thus, cognition is not merely embodied, but also embedded, extended and enactive (4E).

- Cognition is **embodied** because the body plays a critical role in gathering information to guide behavior. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, movement, and visceral sensations all provide critical information that we can't help but respond to.
- This cognitive process is by its nature **embedded** in a given environment.
- Cognition is further **extended** by interaction with the tools we use – a hammer, say or a cell phone. As it turns out, cognition is even **extended** by interaction with other people.
- And it is **enactive**. Cognition does not merely represent some unchanging world "out there." Rather, through cognition, we play an active role in shaping the world we perceive.

Understanding this is **essential** for coaches.

If we are to successfully help our clients gather information to guide their behavior, then we need to understand not only how cognition works, but also how to intervene in it.

APPLIED COGNITIVE SCIENCE FOR COACHES

Let's go back to the outcomes of embodied coaching that I referred to earlier. Body-oriented coaching has been shown to ...

- **Expand flourishing** – a key measure of well-being and satisfaction with life.
- **Increase resilience and adaptability** – so critical in these times of upheaval.
- **Amplify empathy and connectedness** – essential for coaches and all other humans.
- **Improve conflict management** – who wouldn't benefit from this?

3 Keys to Cultivating Embodiment

1. Find a qualified guide.
2. Pay close attention to sensation and movement.
3. Engage in relevant embodied practice.

The research² also shows that through body-oriented coaching, these outcomes occur at rates higher than other more popular, widely-known and already highly effective mind-body practices.

One key difference between body-oriented coaching and other mind-body modalities is that by definition, this approach to coaching embeds embodied practice in the context of our hopes, dreams, visions, and coaching goals. In other words, embodied coaching draws on the principles underlying 4E cognition by facilitating embodied learning within the full scope of one's life. Body-oriented coaching is not simply embodied, but also inherently embedded, extended, and enactive.

One key difference between embodied coaching and more conversationally-oriented coaching methods is that the

clients is to cultivate your own embodied self-awareness. There is no shortcut to this process – you simply must walk the path of experiential embodied learning yourself before you can serve as an effective guide. That is a truism in coaching at all times, and never more so than with respect to embodiment. Make training in embodied coaching methods a top priority for your ongoing education, and be sure to seek out a qualified guide.

Meanwhile, pay exquisitely close attention to sensation and movement, particularly as it reveals itself in the most emotionally salient moments of your life. Make a list of words to describe the sensations you experience. The more effectively you can do this for yourself, the more capable you'll be at offering it to your clients.

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body is regarded as a primary means of guiding change. Body-oriented coaches help their clients discover the 4E elements of their hopes, dreams, visions and goals. Through highly relevant observations, experiential exercises, powerful questions and embodied practices, clients come to know their own "mind" – really, their bodymind – much more intimately. This evokes new insights and facilitates change.

By marrying the best of embodied practice with the best of psychological development, body-oriented coaching creates a powerful blend that leverages the full capacity of our cognitive faculties to support meaningful forward progress on treasured aims and goals.

WORKING WITH YOUR CLIENTS MEANS WORKING WITH YOURSELF

The single most important thing you can do to bring these benefits to your

Finally, engage in an ongoing, daily embodied practice that is relevant to your concerns. Want to partner better? Try learning tango. Need to extend out to more clients? Practice reaching out with your arms while speaking aloud about who you want to reach and why. Are boundaries an issue for you? Say no while pushing a rolling chair away from you.

It's not always easy or obvious how to design an embodied practice that's relevant to your concerns. That's why it's important to get training. But once you've explored this territory enough, you'll get the hang of it. When you're ready to share it with your clients, you'll know... because you will have embodied the skills by practicing them yourself. •

NOTES:

1, 2 rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=case1647524618203834

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