

Coaching Tip: How to Set Up Thought Work

Welcome to my coaching tip of the week on how to set up thought work with resistant clients.

Last week, a coach emailed me this:

Dear Jackie,

What do you do when you have a client who doesn't want to take ownership over her thoughts? My client is super resistant to my coaching, pushes back when I attempt to do thought work and insists that the reason she is upset is due to external circumstances – two weeks ago her husband forgot her birthday, last week her brother flaked out and didn't show up for dinner, and she generally believes that her boss doesn't appreciate her. I've tried to do thought work with her but I can't nail her down – every time I do, she goes off on a tangent and gets entangled in her story – how flakey her brother is or how her boss is such an asshole. I keep bringing her back but honestly it's exhausting and I don't feel like I'm making any headway.

Coaches, keep in mind that your clients are not resisting you even though it may feel that way, rather they're resisting taking responsibility for their thinking. It's not their fault. It's just the way their brain has been wired. This is important to know because if you make their resistance mean something about your ability as a coach, that will only trigger self-doubt and hesitation on your part and you won't coach from your Essential Self. When that happens you don't

have access to the creative part of your brain to do something different or pivot when you hit a cul-de-sac.

Taking responsibility for our thinking is uncomfortable for most of us because:

A. We would rather give another person credit for our emotional life – in other words, we play the blame game. It's what we've learned, adopted and integrated along the way from our family of origin, teachers, and other influential people in our life.

B. Ego-identification. Owning our thoughts threatens our role, our false identities or the stories we've created. "Who would you be without the thought?" can feel scary to people who are married to their ideas, and how they perceive themselves or want to be perceived in the outside world. For example, who would a mother be without the thought that she needs to be hyper-vigilant in order to keep her kids safe? That can be very threatening if her identity is wrapped up in motherhood and her definition of a "good" mother.

C. Last, once we bring our thinking into our conscious awareness, it requires that we take steps towards managing our thoughts and feelings. In other words, it forces us to step into emotional adulthood. Without conscious awareness, our brain habituates and continues to do the same thing over and over again – even when the results are less than ideal or plain old suck.

Sticking with your client and inviting them to become more aware of the tapes in their head, despite its discomfort, is the key to rewiring and building new neural pathways in the brain. Martha says the brain that observes itself, changes itself.

So, in order for your clients to be willing to explore their thinking, you want to make sure you set up an optimal environment. A container, if you will, where your clients feel safe, not judged and where they can trust you to handle their issues with both empathy and perspective.

The very first thing I do with all my clients is share the Framework for Coaching. The framework, if you recall from coach training, is made up

of four components – it's in your binder but if you don't have that, click [here](#) to download my Basic Coaching Framework and Map.

When your clients understand that their circumstances create their thoughts, their thoughts generate their feelings and their feelings trigger their actions or behaviors (and ultimately their results), they will have a better understanding of your coaching methodology – they'll understand why you're coaching them in the way that you are. Bringing this model to their awareness is also powerful outside of the coaching relationship because, in addition to teaching them mindfulness, you have given them a tool or a framework that they can easily access when they find themselves stressed or upset. Separating out what's bothering them using these 4 components can be very beneficial and useful to story fondlers.

Once you've shared the Framework for Coaching with your clients, here are some practical ways you can tee up your coaching to make it safer and easier for them to open up:

“Your thoughts aren't personal – I've had that thought and I know a lot of other people have it too.”

“I used to think that way until I found a way to question my thoughts.”

“It takes energy to be at war with yourself (and your thoughts) and a whole lot of effort to convince yourself of what's not. Would you be willing to enlighten your mind and end the war?”

“Your emotions are reflective of self-talk; we all have a running commentary that's identified by the voice in our head. It can be a real torture chamber. What does your mind say about this situation?”

“Would you be willing, just for a minute or two, to own this thought? What do you feel when you take responsibility for how you think rather than blaming the situation or other person?”

“Your mind is like my mind, it creates all sorts of interpretations and stories, some feel good but some of them create suffering and upset. If I had this thought, this is how I might react – I might feel sad, upset

and annoyed. I might want to lash out or start a fight with my husband. How about you?"

"I know this feels a little scary. I felt the same way when I first started questioning my beliefs. I thought I would feel more out of control but actually I felt more in control. When you can name what you're thinking and feeling, you can take steps to manage it."

"When you take responsibility for your thinking, you take authority over it – it empowers us."

"I'm not challenging you; I'm challenging your brain."

"What's important is how you hurt yourself when you believe _____ (your boss hates you, your kids need to get along and they don't, your partner doesn't care about you)."

I hope you enjoyed my coaching tip of the week... and, as usual, I'd love to know how these tips are working for you and if there's any coaching conundrums that you have. I may create a tip just for you!

Cheers,

Jackie