

**E**motion can be a significant indicator that a client may need a coaching intervention

(Bachkirova & Cox, 2007). Yet little is written about how a coach can address and work with emotion. And while coach training often suggests that expressions of strong emotion in clients may indicate a need for more specialist help, working with potentially relevant and appropriate emotion is not generally covered in such training.

However, emotional experience can be very useful for coaches to explore because emotion is considered to have an 'intentional' object (Frijda, 2008), in contrast to mood. If, for example, the client experiences the emotion of 'frustration', the emotion is related to an 'object', so the client can often describe why they feel it.

In contrast, a mood is generally considered to be a low-intensity background state, objectless and free-floating, that can last for some time (Oatley *et al.*, 2006). A client may thus be in an irritable mood, and unable to state why, but may be frustrated with a process or person that can be identified as the object of the emotion.

Discussion of the 'object' of this frustration can be both informative and revealing, leading to increased self-awareness for the client. By understanding what they find frustrating, they can start to formulate potential action plans.

Research also indicates that emotion is a strong motivator in goal achievement (Gross & Thompson, 2007) and, given the high profile of goal-setting in some coaching paradigms, emotional work may be important in goal attainment.



## MORE THAN A FEELING

Working with emotion in coaching is an under-researched and challenging area. However, with the right approach and tools, it offers insight into client sense-making and can help with goal attainment, argue Peter Duffell and Carmelina Lawton-Smith

Many coaches are aware of and work with Emotional Intelligence (known as EQ), which can loosely be defined as the ability to recognise emotion in oneself and others (*Salovey & Mayer, 1995*). Coaches are expected to have high personal EQ and many work explicitly to enhance that of their clients. However, coaching can also use emotion to go beyond this and explore emotions associated with sense-making (*Du Toit, 2006*).

Emotion is often the result of how the individual makes sense of a situation. For example, anxiety may be expressed by a client, and the object of this anxiety could be a fear of failure. The coach will work with the anxiety by addressing the sense-making narrative the client has created.

In such situations, it seems clear that understanding and addressing the emotion is an essential part of the coaching, and it is unlikely that the client goal will be addressed without working with the emotional component. Research also suggests that coaches who fail to investigate such emotions may find their relationship with the client suffers negatively (*Patrick, 2004*).

### Working with emotion

Emotion can therefore be a valuable tool in coaching. It can inform the coach and client in the sense-making of situations. It can be the vital motivator in goal attainment and it can help raise awareness of the real issues that need to be addressed. But how can coaches work practically with emotions in such an under-researched area?

Many coaches express concern about how to enter this territory in a safe and measured way.

There is also the added complication that not all emotions



are rational, so coaches are aware of the need to exercise care.

Even when coaches do enter the domain of emotions, the literature is not always helpful as there is no consensus on definition. This makes emotions hard to investigate, research or discuss.

Individuals also have highly personal and individual experiences of emotion – one person's experience of, say, apprehension, may be very different from another's. This diversity means that no single model is yet available that can

inform coaches' work. Measurements do exist.

The marketing industry has developed various scales to evaluate the emotional impact of advertising on consumers. However, these scales, although well-researched, measure consumer emotional reactions to objects, events and situations, and so have limited relevance to coaching.

Emotion and related cognitive processes have also been extensively studied using fMRI scanners to identify physical



### Case study: 'Angry and upset'

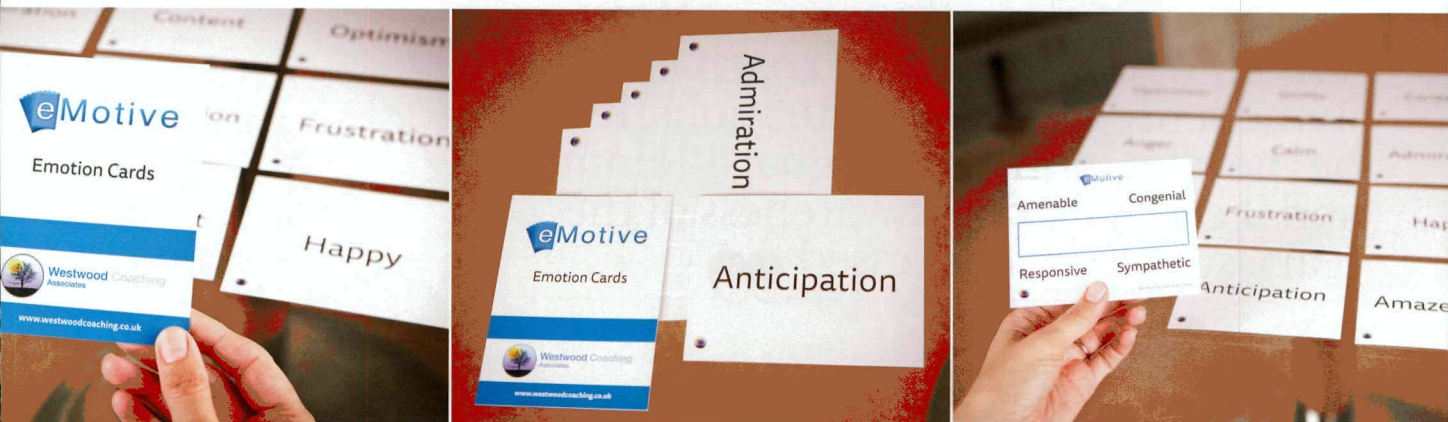
On one occasion a client arrived for their session angry and upset, having come out of a meeting with an under-performing report that had been quite challenging. There had been ongoing performance issues with this particular member of staff and the client struggled to articulate their feelings of frustration with the situation. Using the cards helped to focus the coach-client conversation, first by slowing things down while the client sorted through the cards to pick out those which best conveyed their current emotional feelings.

Having done this, the client immediately noticed they had selected two emotions they considered to be negative, but three that they considered to be positive, so felt that they already had a different perspective on the situation. The client proceeded to qualify their emotions by examining and discussing each card they had selected, before identifying and writing down actions for themselves and the staff member.

Using the cards helped the client to qualify their feelings of frustration, then move beyond them to find the resourcefulness they needed to take the next step to resolving a difficult situation. The client has reported genuine progress in subsequent sessions.

**Flo van Diemen van Thor, internal coach, Oxfordshire County Council**





mechanisms in the brain. The problem here, though, is that such experiments are necessarily limited by the emotional scenarios that can be tested while subjects are in an fMRI machine.

Coaches need access to simple, but effective tools appropriate for the coaching context.

### Further challenges

Coaches who attempt to work with emotion face several challenges.

First, coaches must be careful not to influence the client's description of their emotional feelings, even if the client is having difficulty in finding the right language to describe an emotion. If a coach 'suggests words', it may inadvertently prevent the client from authentically expressing their own emotion. This might limit the degree of self-awareness that the client can then access.

Second, language turns out to be a particular issue when it comes to discussing emotion. Since individual subjective experiences vary, the attributed meaning of words may differ for the coach and the client. If the coach does not clarify the client meaning for the emotions described, the only reference point the coach has for that emotion is their own personal

## eMotive cards: a practical tool

One possible solution to the coach's challenge of working with emotion is eMotive cards (see above). Using words on cards with clients is not a new concept. However, these cards were created following research with coaches and clients focusing specifically on emotion in coaching. The cards eliminate the danger of the coach becoming suggestive by providing a flexible framework where clients are invited to select whichever emotionally descriptive words they feel appropriately reflect their feelings.

Flexibility is also embodied in the use of language. While the 20 cards list 100 words commonly used to describe emotion, the client is also free to add their own emotionally descriptive words on blank cards and on spaces on the printed cards. These two elements taken together give this tool a high degree of flexibility and ensure the approach remains client-centric. Coaches are free to be creative in how they open up powerful conversations with their clients around emotion.

The cards are currently being beta tested and early results have been encouraging.

Flo van Diemen van Thor, an internal coach with Oxfordshire County Council, says that "the cards have helped to untangle difficult experiences allowing the client to take a fresh perspective on how they felt about them".

The initial findings of this testing have also highlighted a number of other benefits.

One of the most significant, is that using the cards creates distance-disassociation from emotions so they can be examined more objectively. It seems that externalising emotions, by making them 'words on a table over there', helps clients more easily discuss their emotional feelings with their coach.

This emerged quite strongly where the cards have been used in work with young adults. This type of tool appears to help them quickly engage in the coaching process, so avoiding the awkwardness they anticipated they would have in describing their emotions to unfamiliar adult coaches. In fact, one young person commented that they "would have felt much more intimidated walking into a room, with a person I didn't know, in order to discuss emotional feelings with which I am uncomfortable".

Coaches also report that the tool enables discussion to emerge naturally and that presenting a physical task in the form of the tool shifts the focus. This means it is very easy to see if their client is engaging.

Coach feedback from the testing suggests that if a client doesn't come up with their own words, then they are not really committed to the coaching.



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meaning, which may be nothing like the client's. For example, if a client tells you that they are 'really, really happy', what does that mean in their context?

In a recent focus group looking at the topic of discussing emotion in coaching, one participant commented that “because of lack of vocabulary, I would struggle with annoyance and frustration; because I think they are incredibly close”. This succinctly identifies why language can be a challenge. If the coach assumes an inappropriate interpretation, it may alter the focus of the discussion – and prove ineffective.

One area, however, is yielding promising results. The research associated with the creation of the eMotive cards (see box, page 35) has generated some real, practical insights into how coaches might successfully navigate emotions. Potential applications and uses continue to emerge. ■

• **Peter Duffell** MA CMP is an independent executive and personal coach

[peter@westwoodcoaching.co.uk](mailto:peter@westwoodcoaching.co.uk)

• **Dr Carmelina Lawton-Smith** is an independent coaching and development specialist and combines her private coaching consultancy with a lecturing role on the MA in Coaching and Mentoring Practice at Oxford Brookes University Business School  
[carmelinalawtonsmith@gmail.com](mailto:carmelinalawtonsmith@gmail.com)



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