The Dad and the Lad: Who is my Client?

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Abstract

This article discusses an applied case study with a young footballer and his father. Contacted initially to offer psychological support to the athlete, after conducting his needs analysis the practitioner was left questioning who his client really was. This paper outlines how the practitioner arrived at the decision to work with the father rather than the athlete, before reflecting on how his own experience as a young athlete fuelled his commitment to work with this case. Drawing upon Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, the intervention's aim was to increase the father's psychological flexibility and explore ways he could better support his son. The evaluation suggested working alongside the practitioner helped the father (a) gain clarity in regard to what was important to him as a parent and (b) begin to behave in a manner which was more aligned to his son's needs. By virtue of the changes he observed in his father, the young athlete also discussed the implications this had on his own mindset and performance.

Keywords: young athlete, sports parent, football, acceptance and commitment therapy

Context

The Practitioner

At the time of this case study I was in my first year of the Professional Doctorate in Sport and Exercise Psychology working toward chartership with the British Psychological Society (BPS) and registration with the Health Care Professions Council (HCPC).

Professional Philosophy and Approach

Research has increasingly recognised the importance of sport psychologists working towards congruence and practicing authentically (Lindsay et al., 2007). To achieve this, practitioners are encouraged to reflect on their practice and align one's core beliefs and values to a theoretical orientation (Poczwardowski et al., 2004). My core beliefs centre upon a relativist ontological perspective, acknowledging that there is not one truth, rather reality is subjective and multiple (Lincoln et al., 2011). Adopting a constructivist epistemological view, I believe knowledge is co-constructed and we are influenced by the socio-cultural environment in which we are embedded (Lincoln et al., 2011). As a result of these beliefs, my natural preference for a philosophy of practice would sit within the realm of a construalist paradigm (Keegan, 2015).

With my aim being to work towards growth and seeking to understand the whole person and the world from their perspective, a humanistic approach lends itself well with how I seek to practice (Tod & Eubank, 2020). I believe that (a) developing one's self-awareness is crucial for subsequent learning and growth, (b) each individual is motivated toward growth but also that (c) growth will vary from person to person. To support clients on their journey nonetheless, I strive to follow the conditions outlined by Rogers (1957) such as validating clients' experience and showing empathy which help to build therapeutic relationships. Furthermore, I strive to refrain from offering personal opinions and suggestions but through the use of reflections and questioning, try and help clients hear and understand themselves

and subsequently find their own solutions to the challenges they are encountering (Rogers, 1979).

Whilst the above principles have provided the foundation to my practice, as I have gained more experience in different sporting contexts, I have become increasingly aware of the need to flex how I practice depending on the needs of the clients and the contexts in which I am situated (Wadsworth et al., 2021). This has transpired due to some clients wanting quick fix solutions to use for performance challenges in upcoming competitions. Challenges which include regulating emotions or performing under pressure for example. To this end, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach (Tod et al., 2017), my approach to service delivery can be described as one which is integrated (Keegan, 2015). As a result, whilst my preference is to utilise a pure Rogerian approach, whilst working with other clients I have drawn upon existential or cognitive-behavioural paradigms. I acknowledge my philosophy of practice is fluid given the stage of development I am at and therefore it is likely to evolve and develop over time (Wadsworth et al., 2021). This case study represents another critical moment in my journey as I strive to practice authentically and in line with my core beliefs and values amidst a number of contextual challenges (Poczwardowski et al., 2004). These challenges include supporting young athletes (Henriksen et al., 2014), working with parents in sport (Lafferty and Triggs, 2014) and managing multiple relationships (McDougall et al., 2015).

The Client

The consultancy had initially begun with me planning to work with a 13-year-old boy named Harry (pseudonym) who was playing for his local grassroots football team as a striker. Since starting to play at the age of five, Harry had trialled with a number of different professional football teams' academies but had never been offered a contract with their respective academies. At the time of contact nonetheless, I was made aware that academy scouts were frequently attending games to watch players in Harry's grassroots team.

Requesting psychological support for his son, Harry's father (Tony) had reached out to me after a peer of mine, who decided not to take on the consultancy due to geographical reasons, passed him my phone number. Now in his 40's, Tony no longer played football but did participate at the semi-professional level before retiring from football.

The Consultancy Process

Intake

During our first phone call, Tony disclosed how he perceived Harry was struggling with confidence whilst playing football. Having played football since he was seven years old, Tony began to compare Harry's performances in the past few months to those in previous years and felt he had noticed a stark contrast in regard to how Harry was performing. More so in matches in comparison to training, Tony believed Harry had begun to play within himself, suggesting he had started taking less risks, was 'playing it easy' and stopped making runs during matches. Tony felt that Harry's confidence impinged on whether he scores in the match or not, and if he is unsuccessful in doing so, his performances decline. Parallel to strategies that have been identified within the literature, Tony recalled some of the different approaches he had used in the build-up to matches to try and help Harry to overcome this difficulty. This included providing direct instructions or initiating informal conversations to try and help Harry feel calm before performing (Tamminen & Holt, 2012). These strategies however were deemed to have had little effect. Concerned about Harry's future sporting prospects if he maintained his current run of form, Tony asked for my help in supporting Harry.

Needs Analysis

Before starting my needs analysis with Harry, consent was gained from Tony and we decided on a non-disclosure agreement meaning anything discussed in mine and Harry's sessions would remain completely confidential. This was something I proposed to Tony, but

admittedly was apprehensive about beforehand. I perceived he may want to be kept in the loop with regard to our conversations and felt I lacked experienced in knowing how to navigate difficult conversations such as this. Despite my concerns, Tony was amenable and we both hoped this would help Harry to feel more comfortable in opening up and talking to myself. Harry was made aware of this decision and I explained how our conversations would stay be between me and him unless there was (a) something which he wanted me to tell his father or (b) whether I felt he or someone else was at risk. Harry said he understood what I meant by this and decided not to ask any questions.

Informal Chats

Taking into account the Harry's biopsychosocial developmental (Kipp, 2018) as well as recommendations from scholars in regard to how to work best with young athletes (Henriksen et al., 2019; Thrower et al., 2023), I decided to adopt an informal and unstructured approach to my needs analysis with Harry. After explaining what sport psychology is and how it can help people; informed by the work of Aoyagi and colleagues (2017), I began to explore (a) his past and how and why he started playing football, (b) what football was like for him at that time, and (c) what his goals were for the future (Aoyagi et al., 2023). In line with my philosophy of practice, I also focused on Harry as a person and therefore made effort to ask about his interests or hobbies outside of football (Thrower et al., 2023). Knowing it would take time to build a rapport, develop trust and consequently provide a space which would allow Harry to feel comfortable in opening up to me, our first sessions were conducted in social environments where we would chat in amongst activities such as table tennis, football and FIFA on the PlayStation (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Aware these were activities Harry enjoyed, whilst being sure to maintain professional boundaries, it was hoped that me joining in and playing with him would help to balance the power dynamic between the two of us and allow him to feel comfortable in my presence (Thrower et al., 2023). Wanting Harry to

feel safe but also respecting confidentiality, as a collective we agreed to stay in Tony's eye sight but far enough away so that he could not hear our conversations.

Behavioural Observation

As part of my needs analysis we agreed as a group that it would be useful for me to watch Harry play. A method which can help to develop contextual sensitivity and supplement information gained from conversations and interviews (Keegan, 2015), I watched Harry play in three matches. In these I did not see Harry display the behaviours Tony had described in our initial phone call, I do however appreciate that this could have been an anomaly and with Harry being aware that I was present may have behaved differently. Aware of the literature which illustrates the influence parents can have on young athletes in sport (Holt & Knight, 2014) I had also hoped to use this opportunity to observe Tony's own behaviours on match day. On both occasions however, we spent the whole duration of the matches getting to know each other and discussing topics outside of football. As a result, I did not feel I was able to fully concentrate on Harry's behaviours and performances and was also not able to observe Tony's natural behaviour on match days. I had therefore planned to conduct additional observations. As I discuss below however and reflecting what I feel illustrates the messy and complex nature of applied sport psychology, the focus of my consultancy shifted.

Who is the client?

Between sessions Tony would take it upon himself to call me and discuss how he felt Harry was performing in matches. This was not agreed prior to commencing our work and due to my inexperience, wasn't something I had considered discussing with Tony. Nonetheless, whilst these phone calls may have been useful, particularly because monitoring a client's progress is an integral part of the consultancy process (Keegan, 2015), it was over the course of these calls that I began to question who my client really was and whether I was working with the right person. Whilst I believe his behaviour was well-intentioned, I

increasingly noticed Tony's comments regarding Harry's performances beginning to concern me. With research illustrating the negative impact parents can have on young individuals sporting experiences (Elliott & Drummond, 2017; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008) in my next session with Harry I decided to try and unpack how he felt in regard to his father's involvement in his football. Being careful with my choice of words due to not wanting to elicit bias, I asked questions such as: "How is it having your dad come to watch you play?", "Can you think of a time where dad has helped you play well?", "Has there ever been a time where dad may not have been as helpful as you hope?". Harry suggested that whilst he valued his dad's opinion and liked him being present to watch him play, he admitted his dad can sometimes become too involved by telling him what to do and how to play before and after matches, something which he felt can often become irritating. As he spoke, the pitch of Harry's voice lowered and I could see he felt awkward discussing this. I continued tentatively, being cautious not to ask too many questions. Harry revealed how Tony can be a distraction during matches as Harry would find himself looking over to his father and become caught up in thinking about how his dad will react to mistakes or errors during the game. As Tony had highlighted at the start of our consultancy, Harry felt in the last few months he had begun taking less shots and risks within matches, a behaviour done in the service of not wanting to invoke a negative response from Tony. At the end of our session I asked whether Harry felt it would be beneficial if I spoke to his dad, to which he agreed. Harry was assured again that anything we discussed wouldn't be repeated to Tony.

After reflecting on my conversations with Tony and Harry, moving forward I felt my work would be more impactful if I were to support Tony rather than Harry. Perhaps naively, I did not recognise this at the start of our relationship, yet it became increasingly apparent that the way Tony was behaving was not matching Harry's needs (Knight & Holt, 2014). A challenge which literature suggests is common between parents and their children in youth

sporting contexts (Furusa, et al., 2021), a few days after mine and Harry's conversation I phoned Tony to discuss the possibility of me and him working closer in order to support Harry. This was a phone call I was dreading firstly because of my inexperience, secondly because I am not a parent myself, and thirdly because I did not want to breach mine and Harry's confidentiality agreement. To combat such anxieties however, I tried to be as non-directive as possible (Knight & Newport, 2018), I proceeded to explain how I was interested in how Tony felt in his role supporting Harry (rather than directly telling him I felt his behaviours were having a negative impact on Harry). Thankfully, this seemed to land well and Tony was honest in the fact that his actions and how he had been supporting Harry may not have been helpful. He admitted he can often become frustrated with Harry and may have been guilty of showing this frustration on the sideline during matches as well as venting in the car post-match, something which isn't uncommon amongst sporting parents (Tamminen et al., 2017). After briefly outlining the important and influential role parents have in the lives of young athletes (Holt & Knight, 2014), again being careful with my choice of words and trying my best not to sound accusatory, I asked Tony whether he would be willing to explore different ways of supporting Harry. Fortunately, he was receptive to this and we agreed to start working together.

Having started the consultation with Harry, I felt it was important I made him aware of the outcome of my conversation with Tony. To ease any possible fears and ensure I did not negatively impact my relationship with Harry, I knew it was paramount I reassured him that confidentiality had not been broken in my conversation with Tony (Thrower et al., 2023). On reflection, it may have also been beneficial for me to discuss my next steps in terms of temporarily terminating consultation with Harry whilst on the phone to Tony. Having got so caught up in trying to make sure the phone call went well however, that seemed to slip my mind. Nonetheless, I arranged a zoom call with Harry a few days after to explain the situation

and inform him that me and his dad would be working together. I told him we would speak again in a few months to see how or if anything had changed. Harry said he was happy with this.

Reflections Prior to the Development of the Intervention

As I reflected on my interactions with Tony and Harry up to this point, I became increasingly aware the counter-transference which was present, and in some part was influencing my decisions and commitment to supporting Harry by working closer with Tony. A reaction which occurs when clients evoke strong thoughts and feelings in the practitioner (Winstone & Gervis, 2006), counter-transference was occurring because Harry's story was similar to my own. It was one that I had already lived and one that fuelled my initial desire to become a sport psychologist. I was once in a similar position, a young male who loved football and had some talent to go with it. With this talent, however, came with what I perceived as pressure inadvertently put on me from my father. A father who wanted the best for me but despite pure intentions to nurture my talent, I felt was putting too much pressure on my shoulders. This led to decreases in performance and eventually dropping out of the sport. Whilst I was not saying this would happen to Harry, as I reflected it became apparent that my own story draws some parallels with the current case study. A story which unfortunately is echoed in an array of youth sport contexts (Dorsch et al., 2015; Gould et al., 2006).

Irrespective of whether therapists or clients recognise its occurrence, transference and counter-transference will be present in most therapies and can either help, hinder or have little effect on the intervention process (Gelso & Hayes, 1998). In this instance, whilst I could not say for certain how much impact it would have had, it without question fuelled my commitment to working with Tony to better help him support Harry. Having been gifted time to reflect on my own playing experience, similar to my feelings towards my own father, I felt

compassion towards Tony. I perceived he only wanted to help Harry, however, I felt he was unsure how best to do this. In light of the counter-transference present, I recognised the importance of managing and being reflective in regard to my own thoughts and feelings during the consultancy process (Winstone & Gervis, 2006). Through personal reflections and discussions my supervisor, I dug deeper into my own experience, exploring what type of support I had wanted from my father and trying to distinguish how this may be different to Tony and Harry's context. Whilst my own story drew parallels with that of Tony and Harry's, what became increasingly to me was the need to tailor my support based on their needs rather than what my own were when I was a young athlete.

Case Formulation/Intervention Planning

After using my supervisor as a sounding board to my interpretations of this case (Knowles et al., 2007), I decided to draw upon Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Hayes et al., 2004) as the theoretical model to inform the intervention. ACT is a growth-oriented approach which places emphasis on working alongside clients to help them live richer and more meaningful lives (Harris, 2019). Despite moving away from my preference for a pure Rogerian approach, ACT aligns well with my humanistic beliefs due to the emphasis it places on (a) building therapeutic relationships and working collaboratively with clients, (b) developing one's self-awareness in order to facilitate learning and development, and (c) acknowledging the unique nature of humans and their context.

Considered a part of the 3rd wave of cognitive behavioural therapies, ACT aims to cultivate client movement toward psychological flexibility, a process which seeks to "increase one's ability for mindful, values-guided action" (Harris, 2019). A viable avenue in which to help parents in regard to the support of their children (Byrne et al., 2021), rather than trying to reduce unwanted cognitions, emotions or behaviours as is the case in traditional cognitive behavioural therapies, ACT derives from a philosophical framework known as functional

contextualism and aims to change an individual's relationship with thoughts, assessing their workability in relation to the context in which it is situated (Hayes et al., 2006).

With reference to the ACT Hexaflex (see Figure 1; Harris, 2019), based on my needs analysis I perceived Tony to be in a state of psychological inflexibility. His behaviour did not appear to be workable in this context and I hypothesised he lacked clarity in regard to what his values were and what was most important to him as Harry's father. Hearing his own, as well as Harry's accounts of how Tony was behaving during and after matches made it plausible to suggest Tony was fusing with thoughts and may benefit from distinguishing between his thinking and noticing self (Harris, 2019). In our first phone call Tony revealed he had sought psychological support for his son due to perceiving a lack of confidence and a drop in recent performances in comparison to previous performances. Tony also sounded concerned about Harry's future prospects in football if his current form continued, language which to me suggested Tony was becoming conceptualised with the past and feared future (Hayes et al., 2006).

From a performance perspective, I felt Harry, over what seemed to be the last few months, was being increasingly impacted by Tony's behaviour in and around match day. Tony's actions were impacting Harry's ability to focus on the pitch and due to the perceived pressure, were causing him to play within himself and take less risks. Most importantly, and if not appropriately addressed, this has potential to impact Harry's psychological well-being, enjoyment, and involvement in the sport (Knight et al., 2010). The aim of this intervention therefore was to work with Tony, using principles of ACT to increase his psychological flexibility and explore ways in which he can better support Harry.

Having navigated the consultancy up to this point and been give reassurance from my supervisor that I was on track, I felt confident moving into the intervention at this point in the consultancy. This was supported by the relationship I felt I had been able to build with Tony,

and how open he had been in regard to his own actions and how receptive he was to work with me. Perhaps it was naivety and the very little prior experience I had to judge it upon, but I was proud of how I acted with integrity and trusted my judgement when the easy option would have been to work with Harry as was initially requested.

Intervention Delivery

With each of the six-core processes (acceptance, contact with the present moment, values, committed action, self-as-context, and defusion) interconnected, there is often overlap when working through an ACT framework (Harris, 2019). This means that whilst I have attempted to write this case study in chronological order of my work with Tony, it is important to note each of the processes were introduced and revisited at various time points across the consultancy. As a starting point nonetheless, my aim was to initially support Tony in aligning with what was most important to him as Harry's father. By discussing his values, I felt this would set the foundation of our work and support us later on in the consultancy as we began to discuss the remaining core processes (Harris, 2019).

Tony was struggling knowing how to best support Harry and identified two approaches which he predominantly used to try and improve Harry's performance. He termed these 'the carrot' (arm around the shoulder) and 'the stick' (firm, Mr motivator) approach. Exploring this further, I asked Tony why he had chosen to draw upon these two approaches, his response was that these were the only two he knew of. Picking up on the language he used throughout sessions, I noticed our conversations frequently came back to how well Harry was playing. I reflected this observation back to Tony and latterly asked "what is most important to you as Harry's father?". A question it appeared he had never been asked before, he seemed taken back and took a long pause. After some reflection, he said he just wanted Harry to a) be happy and b) become the best version of himself, whether that is in football, school or any other aspect of his life.

As clarity in regard to what was important to Tony became more explicit through our dialogue, in line with ACT principles our conversations shifted toward the workability of previous behaviours (Hayes et al., 2002). We explored whether his interactions with Harry before, during, and after training and matches was a) making Harry happy and b) helping him to become the best version of himself. Tony acknowledged his actions may not have been congruous with his new-found values, nonetheless, emphasis was placed on the notion that his approach was not necessarily wrong and may have been well received by another young athlete (Chin & Hayes, 2017). In the context of supporting Harry however he realised his actions were less workable (Hayes et al., 2006). Whilst he only wanted to facilitate Harry's development, in his own words Tony suggested he may have become over-involved. On reflection, Tony felt Harry responded best when he adopted 'the carrot' rather than 'the stick' approach on match days. A problem however lay in that these approaches were used interchangeably depending on Tony's perceived importance of the game. He admitted this may have been confusing for Harry and a contributing factor behind the perceived lack of confidence.

Conversations began moving toward providing Tony resources to defuse from thoughts (Harris, 2019). This was pertinent since Tony recounted occasions before we started working together where he had said something to Harry in the heat of the moment which he later regretted. Using the choice point (see Figure 2; Harris, 2019) as a tool to guide our discussions, Tony conceded these actions may not have been workable and if continued would move him away the type of father he wanted to be. I felt Tony was courageous here as it would have been easy for him to defend such actions in avoidance of difficult feelings and emotions. Personally, this made my work a lot easier and satisfied my own anxieties around wanting to be client-led and not wanting to tell Tony how to parent.

Tony was asked to cast his mind back to a time where he had said something to Harry to which he later regretted and to notice and name the emotions experienced. We proceeded to discuss what thoughts, feelings, and emotions showed up and used the hands as thoughts and feelings metaphor to demonstrate how perspective can be blurred when fused with thoughts (see Figure 3; Harris, 2019). Tony recognised, particularly in the context of Harry's football that he can become hooked by thoughts. We reflected on the short-term gains of venting frustration versus the long-term consequences of such behaviours in light of his chosen values. After a few weeks of discussing this and Tony subsequently practicing defusion techniques, Tony felt he was increasingly able to notice and create separation between himself and the strong emotions and thoughts if and when they did arise. Doing so helped him behave in a manner which he deemed better supported Harry.

Feeling as though he was living in a manner which was more aligned with how he wanted to support Harry, we revisited Tony's previous concerns around Harry's future prospects in football. Time was spent reflecting and re-evaluating such remarks in light of newly-chosen values. Whilst Tony admitted it would be great if Harry was able to pursue a career in the sport, it was acknowledged this was not the be-all and end-all. Tony acknowledged that as long as Harry was happy, he could be too. Rather than getting caught up in thoughts which surrounded where Harry would have ended up if he had played poorly, we began to explore the feasibility of Tony being present in the moment and enjoying watching his son playing football (Hayes et al., 2006).

After recapping previous conversations and discussing any challenges he had faced, eight weeks into our work I was confident Tony was demonstrating increased psychological flexibility. Suggesting he was more aligned with his values, Tony indicated he was behaving in a manner which better supported Harry as he felt increasingly equipped to deal with difficult thoughts and feelings more effectively. Moving forward, Tony was encouraged to

continue reflecting on our conversations and putting into practice the skills we had worked on.

Monitoring and Evaluation

My aim in this intervention was to work with Tony to increase his psychological flexibility and help him better support Harry. In light of these aims, to evaluate and monitor the impact of the intervention, I decided to speak to Tony and Harry individually two-weeks after my final session with Tony and then again after three-months. Important that the evaluation was consistent with the manner in which the intervention was delivered (Keegan, 2015), I met with them face-to-face and engaged in informal conversations to gain feedback and gather their perspectives in regard to the impact of the intervention.

Two-weeks post intervention

Tony. Our discussion here predominantly centred upon Tony's claim that our work together had given him clarity. Asked what he meant by this, he discussed feeling as though our work had provided a clearer idea of what type of parent he wanted to be both in sport but also in everyday life. Being encouraged to reflect on what was important to him as a father was an element of our work which he described as a turning point and a question he wished he had been asked or sought to answer earlier on in parenthood. Tony felt he had been able to take positive steps forward and could already begin to see a difference in Harry's mood.

Harry. Aware I had been working close with his dad, I asked Harry how things had been since we last spoke. Harry said he recognised a change in how his dad was interacting with him in the car before and after matches as well as how he was behaving on the side of the pitch. When asked to describe more specifically what was different, Harry discussed his dad always encouraging him to enjoy himself and then after matches giving him praise for what he did well. Harry suggested Tony was also a lot calmer on the side of the pitch and said he could not hear him and he was not as much of a distraction. By virtue of this, Harry said he

felt more relaxed and confident going into matches and said he wasn't afraid of making mistakes, as he was previously. Harry said he was enjoying football but did maintain that he had never stopped enjoying it.

Three-months post intervention

Tony. There was an indication that whilst there had been times over the last three months where he found it difficult not to get too caught up with what was happening in Harry's matches, on the whole he felt he had been able to manage his emotions and thoughts and behave in a manner which Harry benefitted from. In the months that had passed, Tony said he had tried to communicate more openly with Harry and apply what he had learnt to support Harry in managing his own emotions. Tony also suggested he was now noticing other parent's behaviours and found himself trying to help them when they became frustrated on the side of the pitch. Tony believed Harry was enjoying his football a lot more but informed me of some difficulties Harry had been facing recently in school. Whilst this bought about its own challenges, Tony's attempts to talk openly and develop a stronger relationship with Harry was said to be helping him manage this difficult moment.

Harry. On the whole Harry felt things had been ok over the last few months and said his dad was still being supportive. Harry discussed some of the goals he and his dad set together that he was working toward for the rest of the season. These were to remember to enjoy each game, communicate more with team-mates on the pitch, and hit 20 goals for the season. All of which he said he could achieve and were things that motivated him. Harry then drew upon a recent game where despite not scoring he still felt confident and was still trying to talk to team-mates and be a leader for his peers. This he said was in contrast to matches earlier on in the season where if he missed chances or didn't score he would become pre-occupied with how his dad was reacting, subsequently leading him to not taking risks or as many shots.

Practitioner Reflections

First, I feel the feedback provided by Tony and Harry has given me some indication that my work has had an impact. As one of my first experiences providing psychological support, this is important to me given the nerves I experienced in relation to working 1:1 with clients prior to starting the Professional Doctorate. Reading the literature prior to starting the course, I was aware that experiencing anxiety in regard to doing consultancy work is something a large number of early career practitioners face (Tod, 2007). Gaining positive feedback nonetheless has given me some confidence that I can support the needs of the individuals I work with and be an effective sport psychologist.

As I reflect on this consultancy, whilst I recognise reading Keegan's (2015) book proved a useful tool to outline how and what process to follow when working with a client, I also feel it gave me an unrealistic expectation of doing consultancy work and does not reflect the messiness of such interactions. As a result, this fuelled my self-doubt when encountering challenges, difficult moments, or when I felt my work with Tony and Harry wasn't progressing as Keegan's (2015) model would suggest. This for example is illustrated when after conducting my intake and needs analysis I was left questioning who my client really was. Despite the challenges I faced, I do nonetheless feel I was fortunate in how receptive and open Tony was across my interactions with him. That said, I am not naïve however in thinking this will be case with each of the clients I encounter. As such, of pertinence is the crucial role supervisors have in supporting early career practitioners and being readily available to help them overcome initial self-doubt and complexities across consultancy. As I have strived to achieve in this case study, I also feel it is important scholars and applied practitioners produce research and discuss with trainees what the nature of consultancy work is often like.

Finally, another learning point from this case is the recognition that at times I may need to work with and through stakeholders within individuals' immediate environment in order to facilitate growth (Blom et al., 2013). In this case, rather than agreeing to do what Tony initially asked of me (which was to work solely with Harry), I felt needed to try and create an environment, by working with Tony to better support Harry's development. This is an idea which aligns with the work of Dorsch and colleagues (2022) who, from a systems perspective, discuss how the context and stakeholders present in sporting contexts can influence athlete's development. Moving forward and if working with a similar case in the future, I would (a) prioritise working closely with parents from the outset of the consultancy, and (b) ensure I thoroughly explore the athlete's relationships with those in their support system, something I forgot to cover in enough depth in my needs analysis with Harry. Applying such learnings to my work with academy players at a county cricket club, I recognise I the need to begin working closer with the parents and coaches of the young athletes in order to have a greater and more positive impact on their development (Blom et al., 2013).

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Figure 1

The ACT Hexaflex

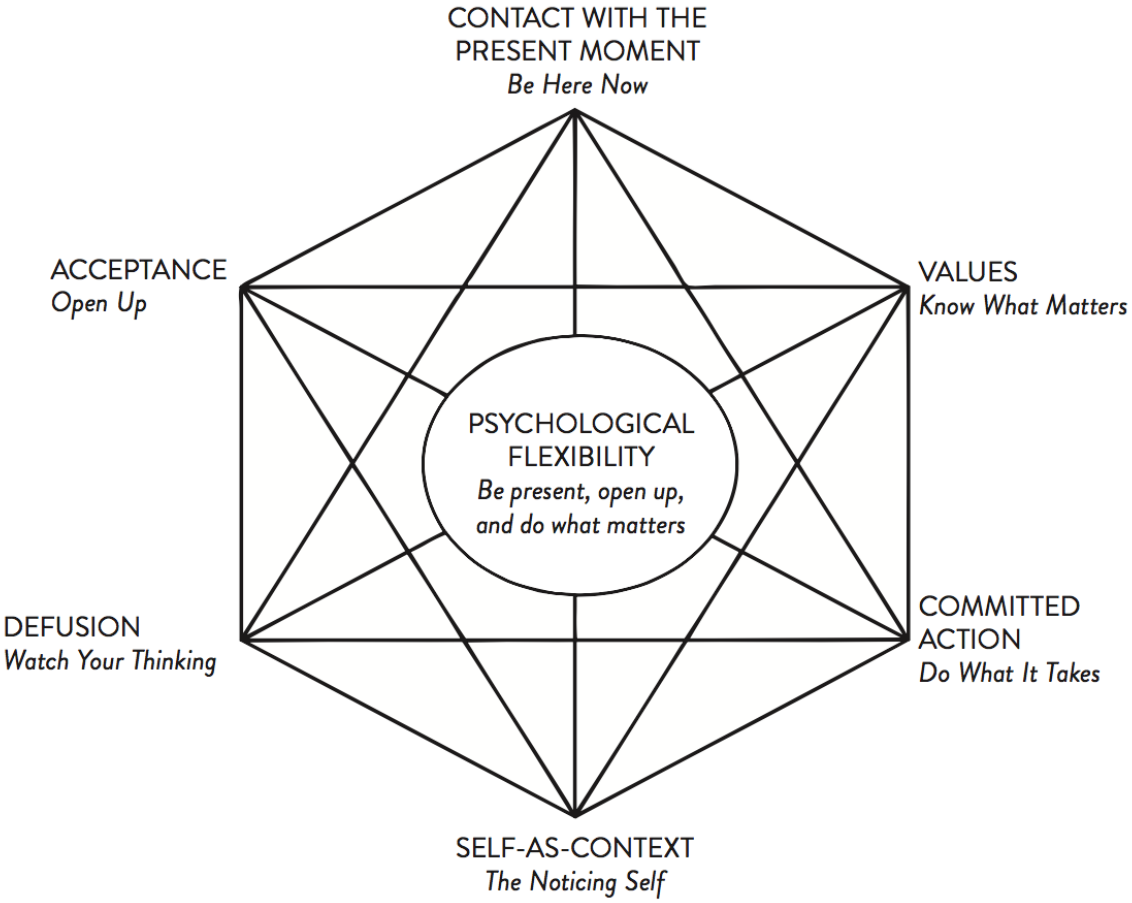


Figure 2

Choice point

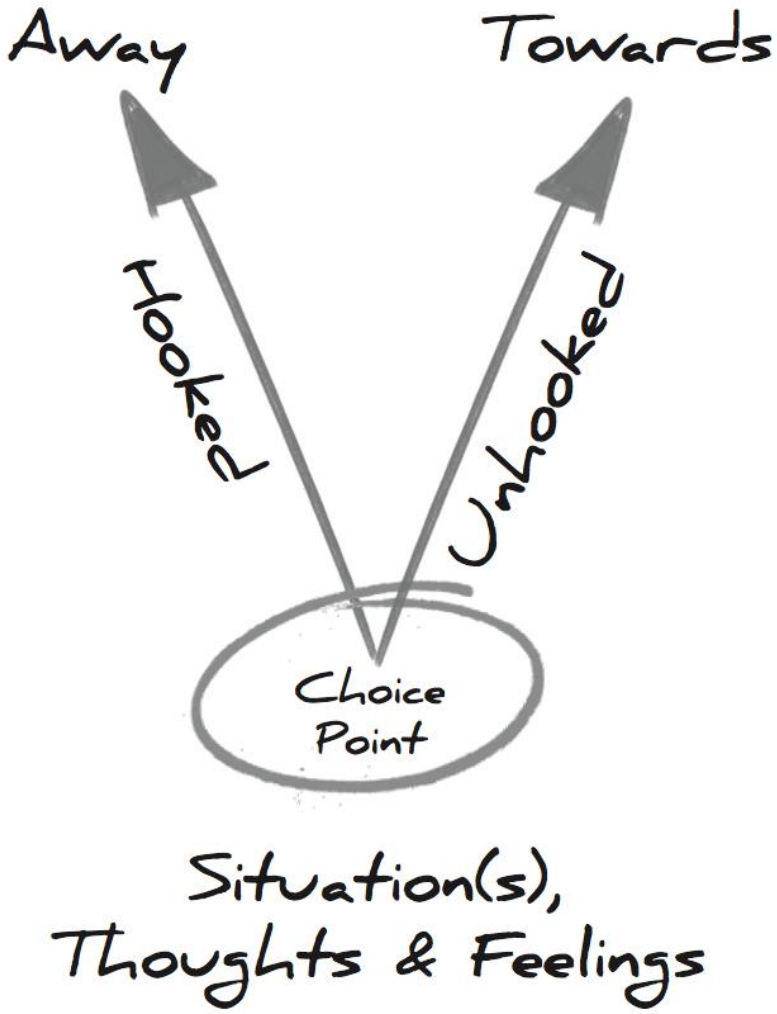
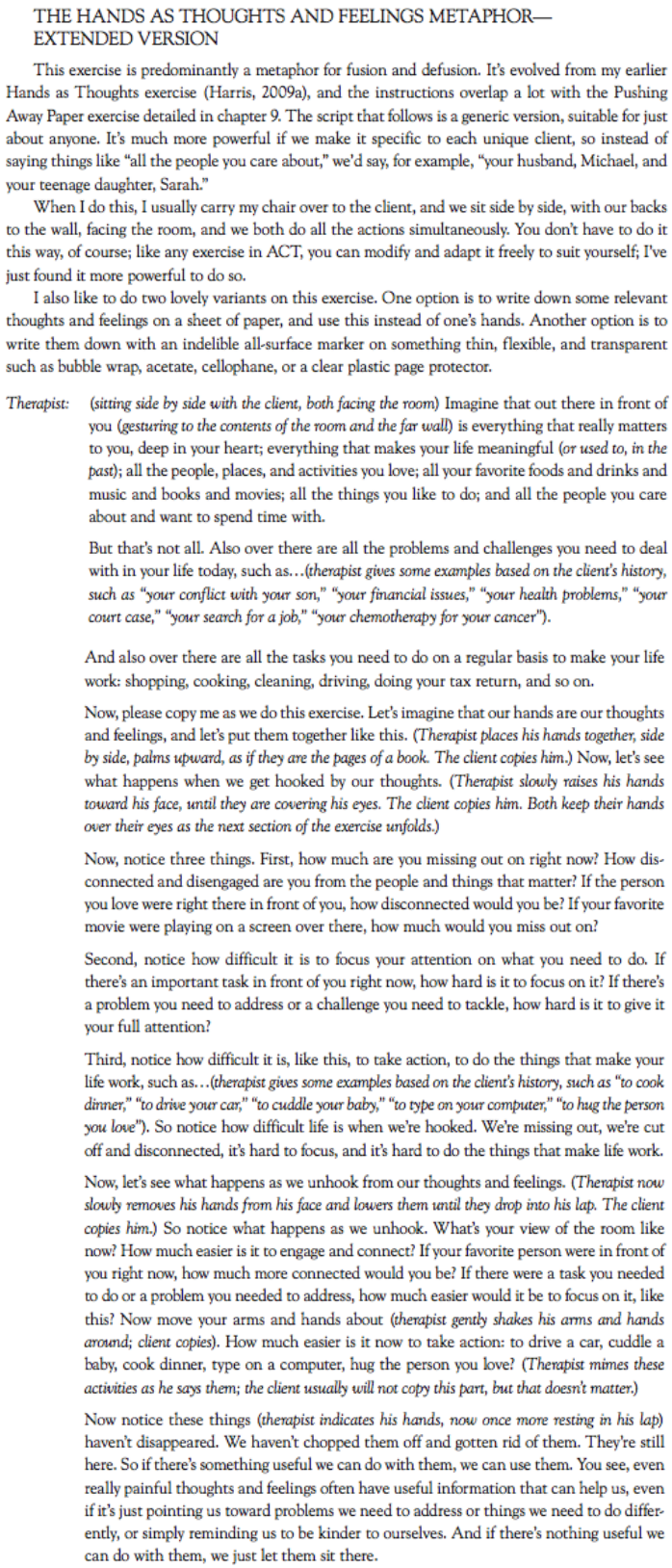


Figure 3

Description of the Hands as Thoughts and Feelings Metaphor



THE HANDS AS THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS METAPHOR—EXTENDED VERSION

This exercise is predominantly a metaphor for fusion and defusion. It's evolved from my earlier Hands as Thoughts exercise (Harris, 2009a), and the instructions overlap a lot with the Pushing Away Paper exercise detailed in chapter 9. The script that follows is a generic version, suitable for just about anyone. It's much more powerful if we make it specific to each unique client, so instead of saying things like "all the people you care about," we'd say, for example, "your husband, Michael, and your teenage daughter, Sarah."

When I do this, I usually carry my chair over to the client, and we sit side by side, with our backs to the wall, facing the room, and we both do all the actions simultaneously. You don't have to do it this way, of course; like any exercise in ACT, you can modify and adapt it freely to suit yourself; I've just found it more powerful to do so.

I also like to do two lovely variants on this exercise. One option is to write down some relevant thoughts and feelings on a sheet of paper, and use this instead of one's hands. Another option is to write them down with an indelible all-surface marker on something thin, flexible, and transparent such as bubble wrap, acetate, cellophane, or a clear plastic page protector.

Therapist: (*sitting side by side with the client, both facing the room*) Imagine that out there in front of you (*gesturing to the contents of the room and the far wall*) is everything that really matters to you, deep in your heart; everything that makes your life meaningful (*or used to, in the past*); all the people, places, and activities you love; all your favorite foods and drinks and music and books and movies; all the things you like to do; and all the people you care about and want to spend time with.

But that's not all. Also over there are all the problems and challenges you need to deal with in your life today, such as…(*therapist gives some examples based on the client's history, such as "your conflict with your son," "your financial issues," "your health problems," "your court case," "your search for a job," "your chemotherapy for your cancer"*).

And also over there are all the tasks you need to do on a regular basis to make your life work: shopping, cooking, cleaning, driving, doing your tax return, and so on.

Now, please copy me as we do this exercise. Let's imagine that our hands are our thoughts and feelings, and let's put them together like this. (*Therapist places his hands together, side by side, palms upward, as if they are the pages of a book. The client copies him.*) Now, let's see what happens when we get hooked by our thoughts. (*Therapist slowly raises his hands toward his face, until they are covering his eyes. The client copies him. Both keep their hands over their eyes as the next section of the exercise unfolds.*)

Now, notice three things. First, how much are you missing out on right now? How disconnected and disengaged are you from the people and things that matter? If the person you love were right there in front of you, how disconnected would you be? If your favorite movie were playing on a screen over there, how much would you miss out on?

Second, notice how difficult it is to focus your attention on what you need to do. If there's an important task in front of you right now, how hard is it to focus on it? If there's a problem you need to address or a challenge you need to tackle, how hard is it to give it your full attention?

Third, notice how difficult it is, like this, to take action, to do the things that make your life work, such as…(*therapist gives some examples based on the client's history, such as "to cook dinner," "to drive your car," "to cuddle your baby," "to type on your computer," "to hug the person you love"*). So notice how difficult life is when we're hooked. We're missing out, we're cut off and disconnected, it's hard to focus, and it's hard to do the things that make life work.

Now, let's see what happens as we unhook from our thoughts and feelings. (*Therapist now slowly removes his hands from his face and lowers them until they drop into his lap. The client copies him.*) So notice what happens as we unhook. What's your view of the room like now? How much easier is it to engage and connect? If your favorite person were in front of you right now, how much more connected would you be? If there were a task you needed to do or a problem you needed to address, how much easier would it be to focus on it, like this? Now move your arms and hands about (*therapist gently shakes his arms and hands around; client copies*). How much easier is it now to take action: to drive a car, cuddle a baby, cook dinner, type on a computer, hug the person you love? (*Therapist mimes these activities as he says them; the client usually will not copy this part, but that doesn't matter.*)

Now notice these things (*therapist indicates his hands, now once more resting in his lap*) haven't disappeared. We haven't chopped them off and gotten rid of them. They're still here. So if there's something useful we can do with them, we can use them. You see, even really painful thoughts and feelings often have useful information that can help us, even if it's just pointing us toward problems we need to address or things we need to do differently, or simply reminding us to be kinder to ourselves. And if there's nothing useful we can do with them, we just let them sit there.