

# NeuroCoaching Protocols for Personal Development and Trauma

Mark Waldman, revised 8-1-23

The protocols below are *suggested* strategies, used for training purposes, to help you master the mindfulness-based communication process that makes NeuroCoaching unique. Feel free to rearrange and modify them as you find innovative ways to integrate them into your professional work. Because each session emerges from an *intuitive* dialogue, only a handful of the following strategies will probably be used, and you will notice that some strategies are more appealing than others to different clients. When you and your client are in a state of “Relaxed Mindful Awareness,” staying in the present moment and using your intuitive skills, each session will evolve differently, often in surprising directions that have little to do with the client’s original intention.

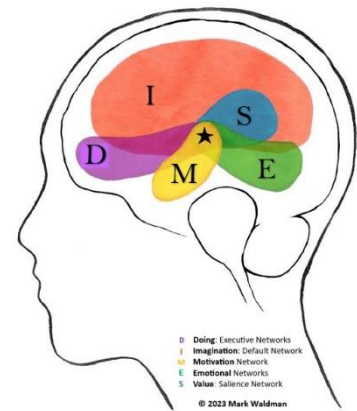
When a trauma emerges during a session (see Lesson 5), it is wise to follow the trauma-based protocol as described below, exploring a specific event scene by scene, super-slowly. Remember: there is no such thing as a repressed memory, and therapists have been sued for encouraging clients to identify one. Memories are constantly changing and often reflect elements that are different from the original event. It isn’t the accuracy of the memory that is important. When a client wants to explore a painful memory – or when one spontaneously arises during a session – you only need to walk through a brief segment. In essence, you are teaching the client how to remain deeply relaxed and observant as each image/feeling comes to mind. This disrupts the memory reconsolidation process as described in Joseph LeDoux’s groundbreaking research.

## WORKING WITH NON-TRAUMA RELATED ISSUES:

1. I recommend creating a simple form to gather key information about your client’s history and desires. Some coaches prefer using a very short “information” document; others prefer to offer a 15-minute free consultation. Experiment with both styles knowing that your approach will continue to evolve throughout your career. My information sheet includes the following: **contact information, client’s stated issues (I ask for three), a list of the three most traumatic experiences in their life, subjective measurements of their degree of anxiety and depression, and most importantly, this question: “What else would you like to add?”**
2. During each session, **take extensive notes** of what your client says. When you are in a mindful state of listening, you are less likely to remember key elements of the session.
3. When you meet your client, **allow for a few minutes of informal conversation** to unfold as you mindfully observe your client’s facial expression, tone of voice, body language, and your own impressions and reactions.
4. Decide when to introduce mindfulness or any of the NeuroCoach relaxation and communication strategies. In business coaching, you will need to *strategically* decide with your client which, if any, of the NeuroCoaching strategies to use. **Give a brief brain-based explanation** when introducing unusual strategies like mindful yawning, super-slow micro-movements, and the importance of speaking briefly.

5. If your client does not speak briefly or slowly *playfully introduce the 10-10 game* and the **20 word “rule,”** counting out the words on one’s fingers. Explain the neuroscientific principle behind this unique technique: that the brain can only hold and remember about 4 “chunks” of information in working memory, which means that the listener will only be able to recall, with accuracy, about 10-20 words of whatever the speaker is talking about. Practice a few rounds of brief conversation and then ask the client to mindfully reflect on the experience of talking slowly and briefly. Limiting speech to 10-20 words rapidly trains the brain to convey more accurate information more quickly. Slower speech also forces the speaker to become selective of the best words to convey essential information, and which will dramatically reduce excessive chaotic thinking associated with anxiety. It’s important to give your client an *experiential* sense of the usefulness of this communication strategy.

6. Throughout the session **consciously alternate** between brief mindful speaking (Compassionate Communication) and ordinary conversation, helping the client become more skilled at shifting between three key brain networks: Central Executive Network (focused attention and thinking), Default Mode Network (imagination, mind-wandering, and daydreaming), and the Salience Network (self- and social-awareness, empathy, intuition, creative problem-solving). In my experience, it helps to hold up the “TIMES” model, as shown in the illustration:



7. Use your intuition to decide if and when to begin a **formal or modified “induction” using only those techniques that both you and your client are comfortable with.** Here are most of the evidence-based strategies we have identified that both deepen and expedite the coaching/therapeutic process, listed in the order that I have personally found to be the most effective (your approach will be different, reflecting your intuitive style and beliefs):

8. Begin with these three mental and physical mindfulness-based relaxation strategies:
  - a. Explain that any form of mental stress will interfere with your ability to solve any problem, and then explain that yawning is the fastest and most effective way to reduce excess neural activity that interferes with concentration, clarity, and productivity. Use the drawing to explain why excessive activity in the Imagination/Default Network is responsible for most psychological problems. Guide the client through **3 mindful yawns,** specifically asking them the notice how each one changes their *mental or emotional state.* Many people will tend to focus on body sensations but you want them to become conscious of cognitive stress. Some clients can’t yawn; have them breathe slowly and deeply through their nostrils and then focus on super-slow movements.
  - b. If a person does not fully enter into a state of Relaxed Mindful Awareness, introduce a **super-slow mindful movement,** pointing out how much more one feels the slower you go and that this allows the brain to send a relaxation signal to those muscles. Have them pause whenever they feel a painful spot and ask them to yawn into it. Usually the pain will disappear (see the bonus section in Lesson 2 for reducing chronic and acute pain).
  - c. Decide if it feels appropriate to introduce **“self-nurturing” touch” and the use of a soft object (pillow, stuffed animal, etc.)** explaining that mindfully generating pleasure can also

- be an efficient way to lower anxiety, stress, and negative thinking. Pay close attention to any negative reaction which may be a sign of past abuse or physical/domestic violence.
- d. Encourage your client to use any of the above stress-reduction techniques throughout the session and explain the value of putting a **mindfulness clock/bell** on their computer or cell phone, setting it to ring 1-3 times an hour to spend 10-60 seconds doing a mindful yawn or stretch, or doing anything that feels pleasurable. This is my only reason for using a bell or Tibetan bowl (make sure you read my blog on how to create a pleasant sound).
9. This strategy has been found to be highly valuable by most clients. Ask your client to deeply relax and to *intuitively* pay attention to the first word that comes to mind when asked: **“What is your deepest innermost value?”** Have them mindfully savor the word, and then have them use their intuition to find two more value-based words and to savor them for 10-30 seconds. Ask your client to repeat these words throughout the session when negative thoughts and feelings disrupt the flow of conversation. Again, use your intuition to decide how much time you want to spend on this exercise or any of the others. The object is to “train” a person how to become mindfully aware of their thoughts and feelings in 15 minutes or less.
  10. When the client has entered a deep state of “Relaxed Mindful Awareness”, have them **ask their intuition what they feel is the most important issue to address**. Use this as the framework for your dialogue until a useful insight is discovered.
  11. **Begin a mindful dialog with your client**, introducing any of the Compassionate Communication strategies that you feel are relevant as you teach them how to have a *mindful* dialogue. Ask your client to share the first thought, feeling, memory, or sensation that intuitively comes to mind regarding their issue as they stay mindfully attentive and relaxed. Write down what the client says and then ask them to share the next thought, feeling, or memory that comes to mind. You can also ask your client to expand upon anything they say. If it is positive, have them mindfully savor it; if negative, have them mindfully observe it *without judgment*. If a disturbing memory arises, refer to the trauma protocol below. If sadness arises, encourage the client to savor that sadness and follow the feelings, thoughts, and memories associated with it. This usually leads to pleasurable and satisfying emotional release.
  12. I will sometimes ask a client to generate **a list of 5-10 thoughts/feelings/memories associated with the problem** being explored. Sometimes a new dimension of the problem – or a different problem – emerges, and sometimes surprising insights occur. In my own practice (yours will be different), I might choose to review the list of comments the client made, having them use a numbering system to identify how true or relevant the statements appear to be. As they mindfully explore the more intense or important topics and re-evaluate the intensity level, it will often be reduced to a level of 1-3, based on a 1-10 scale. **These are variations of the SUDS scale**. As your NeuroCoaching practice evolves, your style of induction and guidance will change, and as you will see in most of the video sessions I conducted with my clients, I rarely follow this protocol.

**Remember: all of the above strategies, and the following ones, is a *practice template* to help you discover which techniques work best for you and your clients.**

13. Throughout the session, and especially at the end, have your client **ask his/her intuition for any insights or “aha” experiences**. Then share your own insights and have your client mindfully observe them to see your perspective has value to them. I consider this to be one of the most important strategies to use and sadly, one that few coaches, therapists, or teachers employ. Often the insight is not even related to what was specifically addressed. In any follow-up sessions, begin by asking the client to share with you additional insights that emerged from and since the previous session.
14. If appropriate, **encourage your client to share their insights and discoveries with others** (in person, even on social media) and to teach others some of the relaxation, mindfulness, and communication strategies they found useful. This “pass it on” strategy will deepen a client’s learning experience, autonomy, and self-confidence.

### **WORKING WITH EMOTIONAL DISTRESS ASSOCIATED WITH TRAUMATIC EVENTS:**

**Note:** In my professional experience, it is often safer to explore traumatic memories in a video conference call, where the person is in the safety of their own home and more distant from the coach. For many victims of trauma, real-time face-to-face consultations – individually or in a group/workshop situation – can suddenly feel overwhelming, bringing up too many fearful reactions too fast.

**When working with emotional distress and/or post-traumatic stress, add these steps to the basic NeuroCoaching Protocol. In my experience – both with my clients and student coaches – it is very important to follow these steps in the order listed below:**

15. Provide information about the misconceptions surrounding trauma therapies and the dangerous myth of “repressed memories”. Explain how memories are a constantly changing creative process, and that the accuracy of a remembered event is not essential to the healing/growth process. Encourage your client to become curious about how a disturbing feeling or “memory” can be changed by following the intuitive creativity of one’s imagination.
16. Teach the individual how to enter brief states of “Relaxed Mindful Awareness” where they can have a sense of shifting between Executive, Salience, and Default Networks.
17. Establish a safe mental state using inner values.
18. Have your client use a soft object and/or self-soothing touch (hugging, squeezing, etc.) or other pleasure-evoking strategy during the recollection of any strong negative feeling or thought. Have them mirror you as you demonstrate with a soft pillow.
19. If the client wants to mindfully explore a past traumatic experience, encourage them to allow their imagination and intuition to select a salient scene from any past emotional disturbance that comes to mind. Tell your client to imagine that both of you are sitting in the back of a

movie theater, watching a scene-by-scene story unfold. It doesn't matter if the recollection is real or imaginary; we're just following along as spectators.

20. Only a small portion of a single disturbing event needs to be explored, and the process should take no longer than 10-15 minutes. If another emotional disturbance or memory trace emerges later, explore it in another session.
21. Describe a single scene in 20-30 words, then return to a state of Relaxed Mindful Awareness using the strategies the client finds most useful: yawning, stretching, self-nurturing touch, focusing on an inner value, etc. Using a numbering scale, have your client evaluate the emotional intensity they are experiencing in the present moment. If the numbers increase, discontinue the exploration.
22. During the "movie theater" recollection process, have your client mindfully observe painful scenes and mindfully savor positive moments. Explain the importance of building a behavior of observation and savoring. Encourage your client to seek insights and savor them throughout the session. Write them down to later share with the client.
23. At the end of the session – which might be as short as 10 minutes to ensure that the client does not feel overwhelmed or exhausted – review the client's insights, savor them again, and check to see how low the emotional intensity has become as they again reflect on the "memory". Talk about how the Imagination/Default Network is constantly revising memory traces to use them in achieving current goals and desires. Encourage them to practice Relaxed Mindful Awareness with a trusted friend on a regular basis, and to share small parts of their current emotional experiences while both people remain deeply relaxed throughout the conversation. Provide mindfulness tools to practice for the following week.
24. Ask the client to use their intuition to see if they desire a second session. Although I believe that a second session is often helpful, a free choice needs to be made by the client. A strong suggestion that they should return – or that other memories need to be explored – is an imposition of your beliefs about psychological health, and encouraging a client to uncover a supposedly repressed memory can bring about serious legal trouble. It will also invalidate your NeuroCoaching certificate.

Trauma-Centered NeuroCoaching strategies can be easily modified, and when they are incorporated into other therapy and coaching models, you will see greater change and effectiveness. I recommend that you practice these strategies with other students – without using other techniques – before you apply them to paying clients. And if you desire to work with clients struggling with painful experiences associated with past events, you should take the new course I created. It has helped a lot of my students to feel more comfortable working with very difficult issues.

***And remember:** We cannot assume that another person's "memory" or belief or emotional experience is true or false. Memory processes are not designed to be accurate; they are used to solve problems that are unfolding in the present moment so that we can more easily achieve desired goals. To assume that a memory only reflects a past event is to ignore and undermine the creative processes that are essential post-traumatic growth.*

