

## **Coaching in the Presence of Acknowledged and Unacknowledged Domestic Abuse: Implications for Coaching Practice and Training**

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### **Abstract**

Coaching provides a space for clients to explore what they need in order to reach their personal and professional potential with resulting action and growth. However, very little attention has been paid to romantic and family relationship dynamics where healthy boundaries and attempts at change can trigger vengeful and dangerous reactions. This position paper highlights the need for increased attention on this topic within our profession. It explores the complexities of acknowledged and unacknowledged domestic abuse, philosophical stances that may have influenced its neglect, practical implications, and pathways towards greater awareness and training around domestic abuse in the coaching profession.

*Keywords: Domestic abuse, coercive control, betrayal blindness, client risk*

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### **Introduction**

Coaching often provides a space for clients to become more authentic in their experiences and to explore what they need in order to reach their personal and professional potential. On the flipside, this can involve clients reflecting on what they do not need and has perhaps been getting in the way of this. Issues such as authenticity, meaning, purpose, values, strengths, and healthy boundary setting have been enticing and informative when it comes to coaching practice within numerous spheres (see Spaten & Green, 2018, Otu, 2024, Schneider, Kingsolver, & Rosdahl, 2014, Susing, Green & Grant, 2011, and McQuaid, Niemiec., & Doman, 2018 for examples). However, as a profession, it appears that very little attention has been paid to contexts in which such ventures and any associated attempts to change relationship dynamics may present a very real danger to clients.

Relationship dynamics where healthy boundaries and authenticity are unacceptable, and potentially involve violent or vengeful reactions and are thus a real danger to a client, have received relatively little attention in coaching education and research. A recent scour of coaching journals, ethical standards, professional accreditation and training provider websites revealed barely any hits with regards to domestic abuse issues including domestic violence, coercive control, financial abuse and other experiences that fall within the category. Although notably, domestic abuse was briefly highlighted within a previous *Philosophy of Coaching* issue in a paper providing an ethical framework for coaching research involving vulnerable groups (Collins & Nacif, 2024).

Philosophical stances within the coaching profession may well have fed into the neglect of issues of domestic abuse to date. This paper will also briefly explore how stances with a focus on individual agency, competencies, productivity and potential have contributed to the

neglect of social, cultural and relational contexts for clients (Shoukry & Cox, 2018) and how assumptions around the need for neutrality need to be examined with reference to ethical issues surrounding situations where clients may be at risk of harm (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). As coaching becomes increasingly positioned as a social process (Shoukry & Cox, 2018), set within a web of social systems and relationships, it appears timely to shine a light on the very real possibility that as coaches we may well find ourselves coaching clients who are in abusive relationships with partners or family members.

The current paper argues that increased awareness around domestic abuse is vital given the nature of coaching work, the likelihood of encountering clients experiencing domestic abuse, the inherent but sometimes unacknowledged danger for clients in such relationships, and the possibility that sudden realisations regarding unsafe relationships may occur within the coaching space itself. Touching on personal and professional experiences with domestic abuse issues, domestic abuse is positioned as an important and pressing issue in our profession, one that is likely to entangle with various elements of the coaching process. The paper aims to stimulate professional conversations around domestic abuse through acknowledgment of its complexities, the questioning of philosophical barriers to exploring and recognising domestic abuse, and implications for pathways towards increased awareness and training around these issues. Reflections are also encouraged as to how coaching approaches and assumptions might intersect with the dangers present within abusive relationships and what might be needed moving forward.

### **The complexity of domestic abuse**

Statistics indicate that domestic abuse affects a substantial number of individuals. In the UK, it is estimated that 1 in 5 adults experience domestic abuse in their lifetime (National Centre for Domestic Violence, 2024). Last year, a national crime survey estimated that 2.1 million people aged over 16 years experienced domestic abuse in England and Wales and the police recorded a domestic abuse offence approximately every 40 seconds (Office for National Statistics, 2023). This suggests that many coaching clients will have experienced domestic abuse at some point in their lifetime and that some clients may be in an abusive relationship whilst simultaneously engaging with coaching.

Whilst domestic abuse is often viewed as something that occurs between partners, there is now wide recognition that these forms of abuse can occur within the context of ex-partners and between relatives (Office for National Statistics, 2023). The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 broadly defines domestic abuse as an incident or pattern of incidents between individuals aged over 16 years who are “personally connected” and involving abusive behaviours of a physical, sexual, violent, threatening, controlling, coercive, economic, psychological, emotional, or other abusive nature (see Sections 1 and 2). The Act also recognises that where children see, hear or experience the effects they can also be considered to be victims of the abuse (see Section 3). Specific issues such as LGBTQ+ abuse, honour-based abuse, forced marriage, disability-based abuse and FGM have also been highlighted within the context of domestic abuse, as has the need for specialist support around the dangers presented by attempting to leave an abusive relationship (e.g. Women’s Aid, 2024).

The complexity of domestic abuse is deepened with the narratives and various layers of justification that can be built up around it, leading many individuals who are being subjected to domestic abuse to take a substantial amount of time to recognise and acknowledge the abusive nature of a relationship. The Psychological Violence Executive Summary 2019 report (see Safe Lives, 2024) highlighted that patterns of abuse can often involve a period of

“grooming” and returns to periods of affection which slowly desensitises individuals and normalises the abuse. The report also highlighted that many aspects of psychological abuse can be mistaken as acts of love, particularly in the initial stages, and that abuse is usually interspersed with warmth and kindness to create emotional confusion in a victim. Finally, a key outcome of the report was the need for a wide range of professionals to engage in training around psychological aspects of domestic abuse in order to avoid missing opportunities to identify and support victims. This highlights the complex issue of the recognition of abuse and the journey that it can often represent for a victim.

Domestic abuse, whether by a partner or family member, can often go unacknowledged and unrecognised by victims as it frequently presents an individual with overwhelming internal conflict. As noted by Vaughan Smith (2019) in her explorations of coaching and trauma, the feelings of fear, terror, rage and loneliness that are associated with trauma can be deeply hidden and controlled by survival defence strategies. Domestic abuse represents a fundamental violation of trust within a relationship and such relational betrayals cause a conflict between recognising the danger and violation of trust or preserving a relationship that at some level the individual may feel that they are dependent upon. This is a process that can lead to what Freyd (2020) terms betrayal blindness. This process involves an event or series of events being processed in a way that preserves the relationship, leaves the individual more able to psychologically, and sometimes physically, survive, and results in the unawareness, not-knowing, and forgetting often shown by people in unsafe relational dynamics.

Ultimately, the complexities of domestic abuse, combined with processes such as betrayal blindness, suggest that whilst some clients might acknowledge the existence of domestic abuse within their past or present relationships, there may be cases where clients engage with coaching and are not in acknowledgement (to themselves, the coach, or neither) of the reality of an abusive situation and therefore not disclosing the danger that is present in their family or romantic relationships. Again, going back to the prevalence estimates, coaches are more than likely to at some point work with clients who have been or who are currently victims of domestic abuse. This brings an important yet largely unrecognised challenge to the coaching profession with regards to awareness of potentially abusive contexts swirling around our clients, the ethical implications of neutrality, and the dangers inherent for some clients with regards to explorations of topics that are often central in coaching (e.g. authenticity, identifying and voicing needs, establishing healthy boundaries, and many others that might be deemed central in the exploration of what it means for the client to move towards their personal or professional potential). Despite statistics highlighting the prevalence of domestic abuse and the potential clash of abusive situations with the work being done within the coaching process, there has been very little focus on domestic abuse issues in coaching education and research.

### **Philosophical barriers to exploring and recognising domestic abuse**

It is perhaps surprising that the issue of domestic abuse has not received more attention and exploration within the context of coaching given its prevalence, inherent danger, and the potential clash with some key areas of coaching. However, assumptions that have previously underpinned many areas of coaching may have inadvertently kept attention averted from issues of domestic abuse.

The origins of coaching have been noted to stem from a neoliberalist stance whereby focus is placed upon personal and psychological awareness and the development of competencies that lead to increased productivity (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). Neoliberalist

undertones in society at large have been noted to determine how individuals relate to their bodies, partners, colleagues, children and even our very identities, but at their essence tend to focus on the individual rather than the wider social context, including inequalities, power dynamics and constraints, as “adversity can be overcome” (Verhaeghe, p. 76, 2014).

Such a focus on individual performance, productivity and potential within coaching can serve to discourage reflection on relationships and systems that may be oppressive (Western, 2012). Accordingly, a focus on the individual as a unit within coaching has resulted in less emphasis and curiosity regarding the social and relational processes that surround a client, including social structures of oppression, inequality and relational or societal power dynamics (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). Shoukry (2016) argues that oppressive social contexts affect the entire social and psychological experience of the individual, and that coaching theories that do not consider the impact of oppression may help in maintaining and reproducing oppression.

In their article positioning coaching as a social process, Shoukry and Cox (2018) argued for the importance of understanding of this wider perspective in order to promote the enabling and empowering side of coaching to facilitate its use where social contexts are understood, along with their unique challenges, within the coaching process. Highlighting the presence of neoliberal values in coaching discourse, they explored how different philosophical positions impact the way that coaches might respond to the challenges presented in intercultural or oppressive social contexts. This included ethical questions surrounding the values that coaches uphold within their work such as compassion or confrontation, acceptance or criticality, adaptability or resistance. The authors also questioned the assumption of a need for neutrality in coaching (Cushion, 2018) and highlighted that in contexts of inequality or oppression it might be unethical for a coach to remain neutral (Shoukry, 2017). Van Nieuwerburgh (2017) also highlighted ethical issues around assumptions of neutrality and non-judgement when it comes to situations in which clients may be at risk of harm.

It is clear that many of these same issues are central when it comes to domestic abuse and tap directly into a central tenet of Shoukry and Cox’s paper stating that coaches cannot always be neutral and sometimes bear the responsibility of enabling clients’ critical examination of the reality of their situation. Coaching sometimes takes place within a context of strong power dynamics that thwart a client’s ability to act authentically and to exercise agency. In such situations, and the current paper posits domestic abuse as a specific and sometimes fatal example, taking action to challenge the social order may have dangerous implications for a client and may require higher levels of awareness and competence, reflective practice and supervision (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). As such, domestic abuse presents wide ranging implications for the coaching profession and there is clear impetus and need for greater awareness and training.

### **Implications for coaching practice**

Coaching in the presence of domestic abuse, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged by the client, raises considerable implications for coaching practice. In such contexts, coaches are likely to need to engage in developing their awareness of and reflection on their own histories, boundaries and competencies, contracting, assumptions around the need for neutrality and non-judgement, and the boundary between coaching and therapy. These considerations will be pressing when it comes to abuse that is acknowledged by clients but it could be argued that they are even more crucial when it comes to abuse that is not yet

acknowledged by a client. In such cases, coaching might be taking place in a crucible where neither the client nor the coach has conscious acknowledgement that an abusive context is swirling around the client and the coaching process.

Domestic abuse can remain unacknowledged and unrecognised by the victim due to a range of powerful justifying narratives and processes, yet as a profession and as a society, we rarely discuss these. These narratives and justifications might be seeded by an abusive individual but can also come from the victim themselves. The previously discussed concepts of survival defence mechanisms (Vaughan Smith, 2019) and betrayal blindness (Freyd, 2020) shed light on some aspects of how clients might avoid recognising the abusive nature of a situation. Within the coaching sphere and beyond, I have seen a range of behaviours across both family and romantic relationships that have not been acknowledged as domestic abuse by victims for a number of years and sometimes decades. These include physical violence, coercion around the signing of legal documents, financial abuse such as the control of assets in the victim's name, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, smear campaigns, and ostracism. The implication here is that clients may not be waiting to disclose domestic abuse to a coach for they may not yet be in a place where they are able to recognise their experiences as abusive. Coaches therefore need to be well informed when it comes to spotting the signs of domestic abuse in all its forms and guises, reflective as to how coaching tools might intersect with unacknowledged abuse (e.g. challenging negative automatic thoughts or encouraging authenticity and healthy boundaries), and to have engaged in training and reflection around the potential need to depart from a stance of neutrality to clearly signal when a behaviour or experience raises concerns around domestic abuse.

In the murky and confusing context of unacknowledged domestic abuse, clients may have approached a coach for something completely unrelated to their family or romantic relationship but, in the felt safety of the coaching space, they might begin to question their experiences of their relationship and sudden realisations might occur. I have witnessed first-hand the intensity of this stage of the journey of recognition of abuse and cannot overstate the need for specialist support once an individual realises that they are in an abusive family or romantic relationship and the dangers potentially present when they begin to plan and initiate their exit. Clearly these events arising in coaching situations are not predictable and thus highlight the need for greater awareness, enhanced alertness to signs of domestic abuse, and training around domestic abuse issues from an early stage in a coach's education. Supervision is also likely to be crucial where a coach finds themselves concerned that a client is in an abusive family or romantic relationship or where there are sudden realisations within the coaching space and a clear plan for signposting towards specialist services is perhaps warranted for every practicing coach.

Coaching in the presence of acknowledged abuse brings with it a range of other considerations for a coach and might present in a range of different ways within a coaching context. For example, in some situations the acknowledged abuse may be historical and form a key driver underpinning a sense of meaning and purpose for clients with regards to career change, advocacy or fundraising activities and projects. In other situations the acknowledged abuse might begin to present as the key issue within sessions and might be associated with significant and ongoing emotional distress. In such cases, therapy alongside or instead of coaching may well be most appropriate. Where domestic abuse is acknowledged and active within a client's current situation, such as the newly recognised abuse described above, the implications and considerations for a coach will be pressing, high levels of risk might be

present and, again, coaches are likely to need to signpost clients to specialist support alongside or in place of coaching.

The situations and examples described above illustrate that reflections around the level of acknowledgement of abuse and whether it is historical or current in nature will likely be key areas of concern when it comes to coaching practice. However, the full complexities of domestic abuse and the implications for coaching practice are wide ranging and cannot comprehensively be summed up in one paper. Coaches might experience situations not covered here, including clients who go on to describe clearly abusive behaviours towards family, partners, or perhaps others they have power over or clients who describe abusive behaviours that go in both directions within a relationship. These and many other issues will need further exploration and reflection within our field as we begin to bolster coaching as a social process (Shoukry & Cox, 2018) and to move towards increased awareness and training around issues of domestic abuse.

### **Pathways towards increased awareness and training**

Acknowledging some of the complexities of domestic abuse, its prevalence, how it might present as acknowledged or unacknowledged in the coaching space, and the philosophical stances that might have previously served as barriers to the consideration of domestic abuse within coaching discourse highlights the importance of shining a light on this topic within our field. However, the pathway towards increased awareness and training will require collective action.

The most fundamental part of the initial process surely has to be starting the conversation and spreading awareness. Reflecting on the issues of domestic abuse that are highlighted within this paper hopefully brought up questions with regards to our own experiences with clients, whether we are coaching in the presence of domestic abuse, about the experiences of coaching colleagues, and the competencies and conversations that might be needed moving forwards. Perhaps the reading of this paper stirred feelings of recognition, curiosity and a need to contribute to change when it comes to the level of attention that domestic abuse receives in the coaching profession. If so, I hope those conversations flow and carry forward.

Next, perhaps comes developing a somewhat different stance and not returning to “coaching as normal” where domestic abuse, an issue that is likely to affect the lives of many of our clients, receives little attention within our professional conversations. Interestingly, Shoukry and Cox (2018) propose that, when faced with social complexity, coaches can adopt different positions ranging from denial (i.e. ignoring the social context and focusing on the individual) through to integration and criticality (i.e. to respect the context and work within it, but to also help clients to critically understand it and maybe act on it if needed and desired). It is perhaps this latter position that we need to strive towards with regards to domestic abuse. This would mean a move towards increased understanding and training around the complexities of domestic abuse in order to respect, recognise and work within contexts where domestic abuse is acknowledged or unacknowledged by a client, to reflect on what might be needed, and an increased awareness as to when the work may be outside of competencies or remit.

The pathway forward needs to involve reflections and explorations around a number of issues. This could be structured around a need to increase individual and collective awareness of domestic abuse, a need to incorporate domestic abuse topics into various elements of

training within the coaching profession, and potential implications for supervision. Recommended areas for exploration include:

- the absence of mention of domestic abuse in professional training and ethical guidelines
- the various categories and types of abusive behaviours
- the dangers inherent in resistance to and in exiting an abusive relationship
- the different ways that domestic abuse might present within the coaching space, including the concept of betrayal blindness
- the higher levels of training, competency, reflection, and supervision required around potential issues of domestic abuse
- how and where to appropriately signpost clients for specialist support

## **Conclusions**

This paper was written with the aim of stimulating collective awareness and conversations in coaching training, reflection, supervision and discussions around the inevitable presence of domestic abuse in the lives of a number of coaching clients. Domestic abuse is an issue that might entangle explosively with elements of the coaching process. My goal is to stimulate much greater awareness of and attention to this topic.

It is hoped that the issues discussed have served to stimulate curiosity when it comes to unpacking the issue of domestic abuse and its presence within the coaching space, including invitations to reflect on where we might be coaching in the presence of abuse, the danger present in some relationships and how this might intersect with the coaching process, practical implications, and what might be needed going forward.

Ultimately, as coaching becomes increasingly posited as a social process in which social and relational contexts are recognised to have substantial implications for our clients and for the coaching space, there is a clear need to embed increased awareness of domestic abuse into the coaching profession. My hope is that after reading this paper, there is no return for you with regards to “coaching as normal” and that you create further ripples of awareness in the conversations that you go on to have around these issues in our profession. I, personally and professionally, am hyperaware of the potentially devastating consequences of domestic abuse and how much we need to talk about this issue. We need to start creating these ripples in our collective and professional awareness. In some cases, clients’ lives may well depend upon it.

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