

**An exploration of people's experience of self-doubt in the coaching context, and  
the strategies adopted by coaches to overcome it**

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## **Abstract**

My interest in self-doubt is driven by my personal experience, the experience of a number of my coaching clients, and what appears to be a wider interest in the general population, given the number of self-help books available on self-doubt and related areas. This study explores the experience of self-doubt in coaching, and strategies adopted to overcome it. Although the study focuses largely on self-doubt from the clients' perspective, the coaches' own experience of self-doubt is also briefly examined. A phenomenological approach is adopted to explore the lived experience of self-doubt with eight participants. Four of the participants are clients who have been coached in self-doubt, and four are coaches who have worked with clients in addressing issues of self-doubt. Data are gathered using semi-structured interviews, and are analysed using an interpretivist phenomenological approach. Representative extracts from the transcripts are presented in the findings, their meaning explored and themes identified. The themes are discussed in the conclusion, and a description of self-doubt is proposed. Key results include the suggestion that self-doubt is a work-related phenomenon that may be triggered by change and transition; that it is an emotional experience based on a perception of lack of abilities to perform at work to a satisfactory level; and that men raise it later in their coaching programme than women. The results also suggested that an important element in coaching clients in overcoming self-doubt is the expression of warmth and positive support from coaches, and that supervision is likely to be beneficial for coaches. The implications of the findings for coaching practice are discussed, and a description of self-doubt is proposed. Finally, suggestions are made for further research in this area.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### ***Background to the study***

In the six years I have been coaching, I would estimate that about fifty percent of my clients have raised self-doubt as an issue of concern, often alongside other problems they want to discuss. They do not necessarily use the expression self-doubt; sometimes they might describe it as lack of self-confidence or self-belief. Clients see it as negative, and sometimes feel that it holds them back at work. I considered that if my clients are expressing these concerns to me, then other coaches might be having similar experiences with their clients. I also reflected on what appeared to be a wider interest in the subject; a perusal of the shelves in any bookshop indicates that there are many self-help books available to people on building confidence and overcoming doubt. This may suggest an interest in the subject in the population as a whole.

I have a personal interest in the area. I have experienced self-doubt myself, which arose from my time at school in the early 1960s. I attended a newly opened grammar school as part of the first intake, and spent seven years there. The teaching was based on criticism and punishment rather than support and encouragement. I had not connected this with a tendency to doubt my abilities until I went to a school reunion two years ago, and spent some time talking to my peer group. It seemed that we all shared similar experiences of self-doubt from our school days. Now I understand the cause better, I can challenge my own thinking and beliefs, and make the connection between my past experience and the present.

My interest in self-doubt therefore is driven by my personal experience, the experience of a number of my clients, and what appears to be a wider interest in the general population. I felt that exploring the experience of self-doubt in the coaching context might help my effectiveness as a coach, in that it would give me the opportunity to learn from the experience of others. I also hope that by sharing the results of the study, it might help other coaches working in this area as well. The aim of my study, therefore, is to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of self-doubt, and also identify strategies to help both clients and coaches overcome it. To research the phenomenon from more than one perspective, I decided to involve both clients and coaches in my study.

### ***Context for the study***

The context for my study is work, but not in any specific organisation. I work as a self-employed consultant, so I have no allegiance to any particular company. Similarly, the coaches I interviewed are all independent coaches, and the clients I interviewed have all been coached by coaches external to their organisation. My participants consisted of two male coaches and two female coaches, and two male clients and two female clients. The coaches and clients were not in a coaching relationship together, as I felt this might result in an evaluative, rather than exploratory, study.

I was interested in looking at coaching in self-doubt in the work setting because that is the environment in which I coach. It was also related to my own personal description of my coaching practice, which is to help people identify and minimise barriers to effective performance at work. I also took into account that the nature of most coaching is the workplace.

### ***Outline of the research methodology and method***

Because I am interested in the experience of self-doubt, I did not try to describe the term before I began my study. I felt that working from an existing description might influence the focus of my attention. One of the purposes of the research was to try and establish a description of self-doubt from the findings.

The first purpose of my study was to try and make sense of how people experience self-doubt. In conducting the research, I needed to be confident that the philosophical approach was in line with my view of the world. My stance is a liberal one, and this may be reflected in my underlying approach to coaching, which is humanistic. I am more drawn to understanding than judging. Trying to make sense of another person's perspective is in line with this belief. This suggested that the philosophical approach I needed to take with the research was from the interpretivist paradigm, which is based on the view that people create a social world through what they do and the interpretations they make. This influenced the methodology I adopted, which was phenomenological. This methodology takes the stance that it is not possible to be objective about the area of study, and seeks to describe the meaning of lived experience. Taking this approach meant that I needed to be aware of any



prejudgements that I had about the topic I was investigating. My own subjective experience, values and judgements were likely to influence every aspect of the study, not just the interpretation of the data, but the questions I asked, the way I asked them and the conclusions I drew. Recognising and addressing one's own subjectivity is an important part of this approach, and it led me to make some decisions about how I conducted the research. I decided that I needed to provide clear evidence for the interpretations I made, thus leaving a clear audit trail. I kept a diary to record my experiences and reflections during the research process. I have tried to present as much of the backstage to the study as possible. This means, for example, that I have described in some detail my decisions in designing the study in the Methodology Chapter.

It also means that I need to introduce myself, so the reader will gain some understanding of my perspective. I am a white middle-aged, middle-class woman, who is married with two adult sons. I studied history and English for my first degree after leaving school. My interest in the Arts means that I enjoy literature and the theatre, and I am particularly interested in the richness of our language; this may explain my focus on the metaphors that emerged from the interviews. Much of my career has been in counselling and development, and 15 years ago I took a Masters degree in organisational behaviour out of interest in the subject. My work mainly involves coaching, psychometric assessment, career counselling and team development in organisations. I am in supervision, and meet with my coaching supervisor every four to six weeks.

The method I used for collecting data was by semi-structured interview. This enabled me to ask a number of core questions of all the participants, whilst giving me the flexibility to explore other areas if it was appropriate. The participants were either people I knew personally, or were referred to me through my professional network of other coaches. They had all either been coached in, or had carried out coaching, in the area of self-doubt. I put a lot of effort into building a good relationship with the participants. This was partly in line with my values that people are treated with sensitivity and respect, and also a more practical reason, that trust and goodwill are important resources in helping the researcher gather valid information.

The interviews were recorded on an audiotape and transcribed for analysis. The approach I used for data analysis was interpretative phenomenological. The emphasis in this approach to analysis is on the content and complexity of meaning. It is not a prescriptive methodology, and the researcher develops it to suit their own style of working. The approach I used was to read the transcripts to give me an overview of the content. I then divided them into two data sets: the coaches and the clients. Each transcript was read several times, and I noted anything interesting or significant. I tried to approach each new transcript with an open mind. From this initial reading I began to cluster my margin notes into themes, which in turn were gathered into larger groups for each of the data sets. I decided which themes I would focus on, which was guided by what was relevant to the research questions, and what was particularly interesting. I noted under each theme significant comments, metaphors and particularly rich or illuminating passages from the transcripts, to ensure that the themes were grounded in the content of the interviews. Finally I stepped back and took an overview of the themes from the whole data set to see if any particular patterns were emerging. The major themes I identified from this process were then analysed further to gain a deeper understanding of their meaning.

Alongside the data analysis, I carried out a number of verification checks to address the issue of bias by triangulating my findings with both the participants and professional colleagues.

### ***The structure of the report***

This study is laid out in six chapters, including this Introduction.

Chapter Two discusses the relevant literature. In order to explore the area as fully as possible, the term “self-doubt” is changed to the broader description of “feelings of inadequacy”. References are discussed from the fields of coaching, psychology, counselling and therapy, and education. The literature covering the effects of feelings of inadequacy on performance at work is also explored, and strategies for overcoming such feelings are examined. Finally, the implications of the literature review for the research design are discussed.

Chapter Three discusses the decisions made regarding methodology and method, where the different approaches to gathering and analysing the data are examined.

Chapter Four presents the findings for the first part of the research question: How do people experience self-doubt in the coaching context? In order to gain a greater understanding of self-doubt as a lived experience, the findings are presented in a number of sections: Presentation of self-doubt to the coach; Triggers for self-doubt; The effects of self-doubt on the individual; The effects of self-doubt on work performance; The coaches' experience of self-doubt.

Chapter Five presents the findings for the second part of the research question: What strategies have coaches adopted to overcome self-doubt? The findings are presented in the following sections: Strategies used by coaches; Strategies experienced by the clients; Strategies used by the coaches to overcome their own self-doubt.

In both Chapters Four and Five, the findings are explored firstly from the coaches' perspective, and then from the clients' perspective, with discussion of the themes that emerge. In this way I hope to present as full a picture as possible of the phenomenon. At the end of each section is a summary of the findings, with an overview at the end of each chapter.

Finally, the conclusions from the study are discussed in Chapter Six and a description of self-doubt based on the findings is proposed. The implications for coaching practise are explored, and further areas for study are also suggested. The effect of the study on my own learning and development is also briefly discussed.

### ***Description of terms***

#### ***Coaching***

I felt that a definition was too limiting to give an understanding of the nature of coaching. So for the purposes of this study, I drew on Flaherty's (1999) description "...coaching is a way of working with people that leaves them more competent and more fulfilled so that they are more able to contribute to their organisations and find meaning in what they are doing" (p. 3).

### *Self-doubt*

As discussed earlier, I decided not to define or describe this term before conducting the study.

### ***Gender***

In order to address the issue of gender in writing up this study, in most instances I have used the third person plural (“they”), even though on occasion this has been grammatically incorrect. In cases where this has not proved to be possible, I have used “he” or “she” at random.

### ***Anonymity***

The participants’ identities have been disguised by the use of pseudonyms.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review is to set a context for the research, and enable the researcher to build on what has gone before. Reviewing the literature can also help to shape and refine the methodology.

The literature for this study was gathered and read between January and December 2006. My sources were academic and practitioner books, journals and papers, accessed either through libraries or via the internet.

An initial perusal of the literature indicated that self-doubt is not a term that is widely used, so I broadened my search by including other terms under a general theme of “feelings of inadequacy”. Therefore I have included self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-worth, limiting self-beliefs and negative affirmations in my search.

In order to give some structure to my review, I identified four broad areas to explore, which I had established from my pilot study.

- References in coaching literature to feelings of inadequacy. It seems unlikely that my experience of clients presenting self-doubt is uniquely mine, and if this is the case, one might expect to see references to it in the coaching literature.
- References to feelings of inadequacy in areas related to coaching. Coaching is a new profession, compared to the associated areas of psychology, counselling and therapy, and education, so I decided to explore these more established fields as well.
- Texts looking at the effects of self-doubt on performance and progression at work. As I am interested in coaching in the workplace, this seemed an appropriate area to explore.
- Strategies for overcoming self-doubt. If self-doubt is seen as having a negative impact on work performance, for example, then one might expect to see descriptions in the literature of methods of helping people to overcome it.

### ***References to feelings of inadequacy in the coaching literature***

Feelings of inadequacy do not appear to feature strongly as a topic in mainstream coaching literature. Bachkirova (2004) makes specific reference to the lack of attention paid to issues of confidence and self-esteem in the coaching and mentoring literature (p. 29). This may seem surprising given the preoccupation with building self-confidence and developing self-esteem amongst the population as a whole. A search of Amazon's online book list (accessed 26 Nov 2006) revealed 472 books on developing self-confidence, whereas self-esteem yielded a massive 4,032.

One area where the coaching literature focuses on feelings of inadequacy is connected with the relationship between the coach and the client. Indeed Flaherty (1999) describes this relationship as the most important one in coaching, describing it as "the background for all coaching efforts" (p. 10). He places feelings of inadequacy in this context, referring to the link between mood and self-esteem in relation to the coach understanding the client's negative moods, and therefore reaching a better understanding of the client. However, the reference is very brief. Whitmore (2001) refers to self-esteem in a different context, in relation to giving feedback, in terms of avoiding personalised criticism that damages confidence.

Some of the coaching literature refers to feelings of inadequacy and the effect on performance. Rogers (2004) discusses the effects of self-limiting beliefs, and gives examples of approaches to help the client overcome such blocks and barriers. Similarly, in a six-step model for executive coaching, Zeus and Skiffington (2000) include recognising, examining and challenging self-limiting beliefs that could be impacting on an executives performance or could negatively affect the coaching outcome.

Downey (2003) also refers to the impact of low self-confidence on performance. He states that a key part of the coach's role is to help reduce interference that affects clients, with interference being described as the internal obstacles to performance. He describes the concept from Gallwey's Inner Game of Tennis (1975) that potential minus interference equals performance. So one way of increasing performance is to decrease interference. Downey lists a number of common interferences, including

lack of self-confidence. “Fear and doubt. Nothing interferes with human performance more.” (p. 42).

Another perspective is the link between confidence and stress. Gyllesten and Palmer (2006), in a study investigating the participants experience of the impact of coaching on stress, state that:

“Confidence was one of the main themes found in the analysis and many of the participants had sought coaching in order to increase confidence. Low confidence appeared to have a negative influence on well-being and performance. It was reported that when confidence and job-satisfaction were improved, as a result of the coaching, stress was reduced.” (p. 91).

Bachkirova’s paper (2004) focuses on dealing with self-concept and self-improvement strategies in coaching and mentoring, arguing that if a client raises issues in respect of feelings of inadequacy with their coach, then the coach needs to pay this attention. However, in what could be described as the “core” coaching literature, such as Parsloe and Wray (2000) or Whitworth, Kimsey-House and Sandahl (1998), no mention is made of inadequacy. Peltier (2001), perhaps surprisingly given the psychological perspective of his book, also makes no reference to self-doubt, referring to executive coaching as “designed for a high-functioning client” (p.xxvi).

#### *Overview*

It appears that, despite the availability of a wealth of books in the area of self-doubt to the population as a whole, references in the coaching literature to feelings of inadequacy are relatively scant. There is some acknowledgement of its importance in better understanding the client’s mood, and also in challenging beliefs that might affect the success of the coaching. There is some indication that it may be connected to stress. However, with the exception of Bachkirova, there seems to be little addressing the area of inadequacy as a proper subject of coaching in its own right.

***References to feelings of inadequacy in psychology, counselling and therapy, and education literature***

Unlike in the coaching literature, feelings of inadequacy feature heavily in these associated areas. More importance is placed on defining terms. Hermann, Leonardelli and Arkin (2002), for example, state that although low self-esteem seems to accompany self-doubt, the two are conceptually distinct. Self-doubt refers to how certain a person feels about important abilities, whilst self-esteem refers to global evaluation of oneself as a person. Pelham (1991) refers to research suggesting that in terms of the link between self-doubt and feelings of self-worth, it appears that as doubt about one's important abilities increases, so feelings of self-esteem decrease.

Hermann et al (2002) were able to demonstrate experimentally that individuals already experiencing self-doubt are particularly likely to interpret experimental induction of self-doubt as threatening to their self-esteem. They said that it therefore follows that if steps are not taken to set aside or alleviate feelings of self-doubt, self-esteem may be damaged and decline. This suggests that they see feelings of inadequacy as a continuum, with self-doubt at one end, and self-esteem at the other. The implication from their study is that whilst self-doubt may start as questioning one's abilities, it can develop into a negative evaluation of oneself at a more profound level, and therefore potentially be more damaging. In relation to coaching, this may mean that by addressing areas of self-doubt with clients at an early stage, self-esteem may be preserved.

According to Kelly's (1971) attribution theory, people preserve self-esteem by the way that they appraise events. One aspect of attribution theory is the self-serving bias, where individuals preserve self-esteem by attributing good outcomes to themselves and bad ones to the situation. Blaine and Crocker (1993), in exploring the relationship between self-esteem and self-serving biases, state that research indicates that self-serving biases are widespread (p.55).

They describe the self-serving bias as judgements or interpretations of oneself, one's behaviour and the behaviour of others in ways that are favourable to the self, without requiring that the judgements are accurate according to some objective standard. They summarise the literature in reactions to positive and negative outcomes of high



and low self-esteem people. Although they report some inconsistencies, they state that a fairly clear pattern emerges. It seems that whilst people who are high in self-esteem show self-serving biases in their attributions for positive and negative events, people who have low self-esteem do not show these self-serving beliefs. They discussed the implications of this in relation to failure. People with low self-esteem are more likely to attribute failure to their lack of ability, and will therefore want to avoid it. This means that they are less likely to take risks. People with high self-esteem are not so concerned with avoiding failure as they see it as a less likely outcome, and are more inclined to want to enhance their success by risk-taking.

Judgements about oneself that are not necessarily connected to reality are also an important aspect of self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (1997) as a person's belief in their capacity to achieve a desired outcome. Bandura emphasises the important role of self-efficacy in human functioning; that "people's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true" (p.191). He stated that people's accomplishments are better predicted by their self-efficacy beliefs than by their previous attainments, knowledge or skill. The higher the sense of self-efficacy, the greater the effort, persistence and resilience, and the quicker the recovery in the face of a set-back. People with low self-efficacy on the other hand, may believe things are tougher than they are, which may lead to stress, anxiety and a narrowness of vision of how best to solve problems, and also a desire to avoid tasks they do not feel competent to do. Pajares (2002) points out that individuals tend to select tasks and activities in which they feel competent and confident and avoid those in which they do not.

In a study of confidence versus self-worth in adult learners, Bachkirova (2001) identifies the discrepancy between desirable image (the ideal self) and self-image as a source of dissatisfaction, with confident people having a perception of themselves that was close to their desirable image.

Brookfield (1995) discusses the implications of lack of confidence in what he terms "the impostor syndrome" in teachers. Brookfield states that there is a common feeling amongst teachers of being "found out", which he describes as a lack of confidence or a vulnerability. This is made worse by the privacy ethic prevalent in schools, so that

there is no safe place to air uncertainties and get reassurance. “The presentation of the false face that impostorship entails is usually done for reasons of survival.” (p. 230). Moments of failure associated with change and experimentation increase the sense of impostorship by emphasising how little people can predict and control the consequences of their actions, and may make a teacher reluctant to try new things.

Brookfield was exploring impostorship from an educational perspective, whereas Kets de Vries (2005) takes a wider view. He describes high achievers in many walks of life (including business) who believe they are complete fakes. Taking a psychoanalytical perspective, he describes the “neurotic imposture” (p. 2), talented people who believe they do not deserve their success. Whilst Kets de Vries accepts that we are all impostors to an extent (we present different selves to the world in different situations) the neurotic impostor possesses an extreme form of dysfunctional perception and behaviour which can lead to “absolute” perfectionism. Neurotic impostors set high, unrealistic goals, and feel inadequate when they do not reach them. This can turn them into workaholics. They focus on the negative and fail to give credit for accomplishments. Kets de Vries says neurotic impostors face their greatest challenge when they are promoted to CEO role, as then they feel exposed. He states: “My experience has shown that feelings of neurotic imposture proliferate in today’s organisations, and I encounter this type of dysfunctional perception and behaviour all the time...” (p. 2). This is somewhat at odds with Peltier’s (2001) view that executives are high-functioning.

#### *Overview*

It is interesting to reflect on where Blaine and Crocker’s (1993) research, suggesting that self-serving biases are widespread, sits with this study on self-doubt. It may suggest that those experiencing self-doubt lack the self-serving bias, either as a temporary state or in certain situations.

The literature in this section would appear to suggest that self-doubt and self-esteem are at different ends of a continuum, with self-doubt reflecting concern over one’s abilities, whilst low self-esteem is more connected with a negative evaluation of oneself as a person. This suggests that issues regarding self-esteem may be seen as “deeper”, relating to fundamental feelings of self-worth. It appears that if feelings of

self-doubt are not addressed, then it is possible that deeper feelings of discontent with oneself as a person may follow.

The literature indicates that having a high opinion of oneself, even if it is not grounded in reality, enhances motivation and potentially performance. On the other hand, a self-assessment that is more negative, even if it may be more realistic, may inhibit risk-taking, and potentially limit performance. This has implications for coaching in organisations. If part of the value of coaching for a client is personal growth, then greater self-awareness must be included in that process, which suggests developing a more realistic (and possibly less rosy) view of oneself. However, from an organisational perspective, working with the client to create a positive self-image, however unrealistic, may be seen as a good outcome from coaching, if it results in increased motivation. This area is discussed in greater depth in the following section.

#### ***References to feelings of inadequacy and effect on performance at work***

Bachkirova (2004) suggests that the issue of confidence and self-esteem is “considered to be of marginal concern in the organisational context, judging by the lack of attention to it in the literature on management and organisational behaviour” (p.29). Yet employees’ performance at work must be seen as crucial to organisational achievement, and evidence emerges from a number of perspectives linking feelings of inadequacy and work performance.

As has already been discussed, self-doubt does not figure greatly in the coaching literature. However, Zeus and Skiffington (2000) suggest that self-limiting beliefs could impact negatively on an executive’s performance, and Downey (2003) also states that self-doubt can impair performance.

From a psycho-analytical perspective, Kets de Vries (2005) highlights the potentially self-destructive behaviour of the neurotic impostor. He describes procrastination, the inability to delegate and abrasiveness as characteristics of the neurotic impostor, which could result in a neurotic organisation, with increased employee absenteeism and turnover. However, Kets de Vries suggests that the most dangerous outcome is the effect on the quality of decision-making, describing the neurotic impostor as

fearful, overly cautious, and suppressing entrepreneurial qualities. In other words, the neurotic impostor is risk-averse.

Psychologists too have noted the effects of self-doubt on performance. Berglas and Jones (1978) found that individuals who doubted their ability sought to handicap their performance in some way (for example by not putting themselves forward for certain positions), thus protecting themselves from the attributional implications that a failure, if it occurred, would reflect a clear lack of ability. Also Baumeister (1998) states that self-handicapping can be a strategy to forestall the drawing of unflattering attributions about oneself – it makes failure meaningless. Kolditz and Arkin (1982) suggest that people are more likely to self-handicap in public situations, thus providing an excuse for poor performance both to themselves and to others.

Whereas self-doubt may affect people's performance adversely, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger and De Vohs (2003) found that people with high self-esteem do better on some jobs and tasks, and tend to persist more in the face of failure. Taylor and Brown (1988) surveyed a number of research studies into psychological state and performance that indicate excessively positive self-evaluation, inflated perceptions of mastery and unrealistic optimism are characteristics of normal individuals, and these illusions appear to lead to productivity and creative work. Compton and Postlethwaite (2004) along similar lines, state that economists typically see these biases as weaknesses that lower the welfare of an individual. However, they were able to demonstrate that "in a world where performance depends on emotions, biases in information processing enhance welfare" (p. 1536).

However, the picture is yet more complex. There is evidence that people who have doubts about their abilities may adopt a related but opposite strategy of overachieving, rather than self-handicapping (Oleson, Poehlmann, Yost, Lynch and Arkin, 2000). Self-doubt and fear of failure may lead to increased effort to ensure successful outcomes. Both self-handicappers and over-achievers share similar experiences of self-doubt, but adopt related, but different, coping strategies in the behaviours they engage in to protect themselves from possible failure, or to minimise the self-attributional implications of failure. One might hypothesise that the over-achieving strategy, which may manifest itself in workaholic type behaviour, may be of more

benefit to the organisation, at least in the short term, although it may take its toll on the individual.

Benabou and Tirole (2002) take the economists' perspective in exploring self-doubt. The main thrust of their paper is to look at self-confidence in terms of supply and demand, with self-serving beliefs on the demand side (because they increase motivation) and the risks of over-confidence on the supply side. They debate why it should be that a positive view of oneself, as opposed to a fully accurate one, should be seen as a good thing. Whilst it is not the purpose of this study to discuss this in depth, it is certainly a question that needs to be asked, even if a possible answer is only briefly discussed. The explanation that Benabou and Tirole emphasise most is that self-confidence is valuable because it improves the individual's motivation to undertake projects and persevere in the pursuit of goals, in spite of setbacks and temptations that might test their willpower. This is in line with the views of Bandura (1997), Zeus and Skiffington (2000), Downey (2003), and Gyllesten and Palmer (2006) discussed earlier.

Benabou and Tirole claim that psychologists from William James to the present day are familiar with the relationship between ability and effort in determining performance, so that higher self-confidence enhances the motivation to act. In this way morale plays an important part in difficult endeavours, or as the authors describe it: "when people expect to fail they fail quite effectively, and failure leads to failure more readily for individuals characterised with low self-esteem" (p. 873).

They also point to the divided opinion on the benefits of self-esteem maintenance and positive thinking. For instance, those who endorse and promote the self-efficacy/self-esteem movement include Bandura (1977) and Seligman (1990), pointing to studies that show that a moderate amount of positive illusion has significant affective and functional benefits. There is also a growing interest in the role of applied positive psychology, with its emphasis on optimal functioning, and how this may be used to enhance performance and well-being (Carr, 2004). On the other side are sceptics and outright critics, such as Baumeister (1998) and Swann (1996) who see instead lack of convincing evidence and point to the dangers of over-confidence as well as loss of

standards that results when negative feedback is withheld in the name of preserving self-esteem.

#### *Overview*

Given the evidence that how one feels about oneself and one's abilities appears to affect performance, it is surprising that this issue is little discussed in the organisational and management literature. It appears that whilst there is evidence of the impact of feelings of inadequacy from the psychology and psychoanalytical literature, it has not translated into what this means for people at work. However, Benabou and Tirole (2002) grasp the important consequence that was identified at the end of the last section; that if self-confidence augments an individual's motivation, it provides an incentive for anyone with a vested interest in the individual's performance to build up and maintain their self-confidence and self-esteem.

#### ***References to strategies for overcoming self-doubt***

If the impact of self-doubt on performance at work is as adverse as the literature suggests, then strategies to overcome it could be central to a coach's role. However, as has already been discussed, the coaching literature does not pay much attention to self-doubt in this respect. Indeed, Bachkirova (2004) indicates that the tools for coaches working with clients in this area are very limited, with support, encouragement and positive feedback being regarded as the most useful (p. 30).

Downey (2003) focuses on learning. He uses the example of teaching a person to catch a ball to illustrate how focusing on fear and doubt get in the way of learning. When the "catcher" really becomes focused, the fear and doubt are forgotten and their natural ability to learn came to the fore. Teaching the person to catch shows the coach doing very little, and giving no technical instruction. The coach's primary responsibility is not to teach but to facilitate learning.

Zeus and Skiffington (2000) describe how they ask executives to rate themselves on a list of self-limiting beliefs (such as "No one listens to me. No one wants to get to know me better"). This can be opened up to discuss the way distorted thinking patterns can be self-fulfilling and self-sabotaging. They recommend that all coaches spend at least one session examining and challenging limiting self-beliefs with their

clients. Zeus and Skiffington emphasise that events are neutral and that it is our beliefs that influence how we feel and behave, rather than events. Rogers (2004) also describes strategies for challenging a client's self-limiting beliefs.

From a similar perspective, Neenan and Palmer (2001) describe how a cognitive-behavioural approach to coaching can help clients re-evaluate and re-examine some of their less helpful views of past events and develop alternatives, which can be the basis of self-limiting beliefs.

Brookfield (1995) suggests the way to deal with it is to make it public. "Once impostorship is named as an everyday experience, it loses much of its power." (p. 233). Once experienced teachers admit to their own feelings of impostorship, junior colleagues can feel able to speak. Brookfield says an element of self-doubt can be positive – properly controlled it ensures people do not become complacent and that their practice is continually improving.

Kets de Vries (2005) says psychotherapeutic intervention can help in changing distorted self-perception, as it can increase a person's self-knowledge. He also points to the responsibility of the boss in this respect. A good boss should point out "...that *everyone* in a responsible job occasionally feels unequal to the task and needs time to adjust and learn the ropes" (p. 8) and "...a fear of failure is normal and need not be debilitating" (p. 8). In other words by making self-doubt part of every day experience, some sense of perspective can be gained.

Greenberg (2002) describes a different approach to working with clients, which could potentially be used with people experiencing self-doubt. He regards emotion as fundamental to the construction of the self and is a key determinant of self-organisation. Therapists are viewed as emotion coaches, who work to enhance emotion-focused coping by helping people become aware of, accept and make sense of their emotional experience.

He takes the view that negative self-talk (often linked to self-doubt) gives a mere indication of the type of chatter that can permeate people's consciousness and produce the type of secondary bad feelings that may mask a more primary sadness, shame or

anger. In this situation a coach's task is to help people identify what produces those negative thoughts. The coach works with the client to discover their primary emotion - what it is that they are feeling at their core that leads to the self-critical voices in their heads. The essence of this approach is that by being in touch with the primary emotion, the client aids problem exploration and problem-solving.

In a way this approach is taking a similar view to cognitive behavioural coaching, in that it is challenging the client's beliefs. However, it is different in the approach it takes, focusing less on the cognitive and more on affect. Confusingly, although the book is entitled "therapy", the professional is called a "coach". However, it would seem that the approach borders on therapy and would require a high level of training and also experience of undergoing therapy oneself.

#### *Overview*

The strategies available to the coach appear to be supporting the client and providing positive encouragement, and helping the client to focus on learning or challenging limiting self-beliefs, possibly taking a cognitive behavioural approach. Another suggestion is that it is openly discussed, thus reducing its power. The approaches suggesting psychotherapeutic intervention, or emotion-focused therapy, whilst potentially helpful, are outside the remit of coaching.

#### *Summary of literature review*

The review of the literature suggests that, despite evidence that self-doubt impacts on performance, mostly in an adverse way, it does not appear to feature very strongly in the coaching or organisational literature. It is difficult to understand why so little attention is paid to this area in coaching, given that much coaching is connected with helping people to improve their performance at work. It may be that coaches, or those writing about coaching, see this as more of an area for counselling or psychology.

One theme that has emerged from the literature is that inadequacy is seen as a feeling. It may be triggered by a belief or cognitive appraisal, but the result is an emotional response. This is summed up in Compton and Postlethwaite's (2004) comment that performance depends on emotions.



### ***Implications for research design***

There appears to be little literature to guide the researcher in the area of self-doubt, particularly in relation to coaching at work. Therefore it seemed to me that researching the phenomenon needed to start with understanding the meaning of self-doubt from the perspective of people who had experienced it, in terms of how it felt, what caused it and also what helped to overcome it. In essence I needed to focus on self-doubt as a lived experience. This perspective influenced my choice of research methodology, which will be explored in more depth in the next chapter.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

The last chapter reviewed the available literature on feelings of inadequacy in the fields of coaching, psychology, counselling and therapy, and education. The purpose of the review was to gain a greater understanding of previous research in the area, which might shape and influence my approach to studying self-doubt. This chapter covers my reflections on the most appropriate methodology to fulfil the purpose of this research study, which was to answer the questions:

- How do people experience self-doubt in the coaching context?
- What strategies have coaches adopted to overcome it?

This chapter discusses issues regarding the paradigm and methodological approach. It also considers methods of collecting and analysing data, and issues regarding reliability and validity.

### The paradigm

Robson (2002) makes the point that the research strategy and the methods employed must be appropriate for the question to be answered. The starting point therefore is a consideration of the underlying philosophical approach – the paradigm that forms the foundation on which my research design rests.

There are two philosophies that underpin research. One is known as the positivist approach; the other is known as the interpretivist approach.

The interpretivist approach comes from a different standpoint. It is based on the view that social reality is constructed and interpreted by people, and it does not have tangible qualities that permit it to be measured or observed. This paradigm emphasises how people create a social world through the actions they take and the interpretations they make. It focuses is on how people make sense of their world. The researcher therefore will always be influenced by his or her interpretations of the world, and objectivity is impossible.

The positivist approach may be most suited for researching the natural sciences, although Denscombe (2002) makes the point that the idea that research methods can

be completely objective has always been an ideal rather than reality. However, as Seidman (1998) states, the key issue in the debate between the positivist and the interpretivist paradigm lies in the difference in what is being studied. In the social sciences the subjects of the study can talk, feel and think.

It seemed that for the research I was undertaking, which was trying to make sense of how people experience self-doubt, the interpretivist paradigm was the best suited.

### **Methodological approaches**

The next decision I needed to make was which methodological approach was most appropriate for the purposes of my research. A quantitative approach, which is often used within the positivist paradigm, is based on measurement and is appropriate to answer the question “how much?”. The qualitative approach, on the other hand, concerns itself with exploring and understanding – of attempting to explain by asking questions such as “why, when and how?”. The research I was conducting was focused on understanding the experience of the participants, so the qualitative approach was the most appropriate, and is typically used within the interpretivist paradigm.

I considered four ways of carrying out qualitative research:

- Action research
- Case study
- Grounded theory
- Phenomenological

#### *Action research*

Action research aims to influence or change some aspect of the field of research (Robson, 2002 p. 215). I was more interested in exploring the strategies that coaches were currently using to help their clients address issues of self-doubt, rather than bring that change about myself.

### *Case study*

The case study explores a “bounded system” or a case that is specific in terms of time, place and subject or person (Creswell, 1998 p. 61). I thought it was unlikely that the experience of self-doubt was unique enough to benefit from this approach. The case study would give me rich and detailed data, but would not give the different perspectives on this relatively widespread phenomenon that I was seeking.

### *Grounded theory*

Grounded theory aims to generate a theory relating to the particular situation that is the focus of the study (Robson 2002, p. 190). Creswell (1998) describes the researcher making a number of visits to the field to collect interview data until saturation point is reached. I decided against this approach because my focus was in understanding the participants’ experience rather than developing theories from it. Furthermore, from a practical perspective in terms of time and number of participants, it would be difficult to carry out the research.

### *Phenomenological*

The phenomenological approach describes the meaning of the lived experience about a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). It therefore seemed most appropriate to adopt this methodology. The phenomenological approach is to suspend all judgements about what is “real” until they are founded on a more certain basis. It is particularly important with this methodology that the researcher is aware of his or her own prejudgements and tries to set them aside: a process that is known as “bracketing”.

At this point in my reading on methodology I began to have some concerns. It seemed to me that the idea of “bracketing” was not only difficult to achieve, in that it implied that it was possible to set aside the Self, but is also seemed to be more in line with the positivist paradigm – the researcher as a neutral tool in the research process. I felt uncomfortable with “bracketing” as being somewhat disingenuous.

This led to further reflections on potential difficulties in conducting the research. I considered possible tensions in the research design and identified that there may be:

- Tensions between openness and anonymity

- Tensions between focusing on people and focusing on data
- Tensions between developing a methodology and the ‘untidiness’ of phenomenological research
- Tensions between the need to develop research that could be replicated, and the unique Self that each researcher brings to a phenomenological study.

To a large extent this period of reflection was to do with my values. I was helped greatly in my reflections by reading the works of four authors. Chenail (1995), Seidman (1998) and Smith & Osborne (2003) all focus in particular on the importance of how people are treated during research, whilst Johnson (1999) discusses the methodological difficulties of qualitative studies. This reflection led me to make a number of decisions:

- I would present as much as possible what Chenail describes as “the backstage” of my research (Chenail, 1995 p.1) whilst ensuring anonymity for the participants.
- I would be mindful of power issues in research, as identified by Seidman (1998), and put the relationship with the participants at the heart of my study.
- I would attempt to be systematic and rigorous in the way I developed the methodology. Denscombe (2002) emphasises the need for placing structure around the uncertainty and untidiness of interpretivist research.
- I would attempt to take a clear and systematic approach to collecting and analysing the data, as Johnson (1999) suggests.
- I would address the issue of inconcludability (described by Johnson (1999) as the notion that accounts are never conclusive and can always be added to) by a process of verification with the participants. This verification would also attempt to address the problem of reflexivity, by reducing or highlighting my influence on the data.
- I would produce evidence for my interpretations whilst recognising their subjectivity, leaving a clear “audit trail” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

This process of reflection led me to qualify the phenomenological approach further. Reading Smith & Osborn (2003) helped me to identify an approach that was more in line with my desire to be open and truthful in the way I conducted the research. They

describe how interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) emphasises sense-making by both the participant and the researcher. They suggest it is a particularly suitable approach when the research is focused on how individuals are perceiving the specific situation they are facing, and how they are making sense of their world. One of the precepts underpinning IPA is that it is a personal and dynamic process, with the researcher taking an active part in trying to get close to the participant's personal world.

I therefore abandoned the idea of bracketing, and took the standpoint that "In a research interview you are the research instrument and you are not a standard product" Gilham (2002, p. 4). This meant that I needed to be very clear about my own assumptions. In this respect I kept a research diary, into which I made regular entries when undertaking some part of the research. Denscombe (2002) emphasises the importance of self-evaluation by the researcher, and using the research diary to that end. Whilst the diary is intended to capture the researcher's thoughts on research process, it is also a valuable way of reflecting on one's social values, self-interest, prejudices and personal experience, which indeed in themselves impact on how the research is carried out.

## **Method**

I considered three possible means of collecting data. These are:

- Observation
- Diary
- Interview

### *Observation*

Observation as a methodology was unlikely to allow me to access the information I needed. I was interested in how the participants made sense of their world, rather than observing their behaviour.

### *Diary*

The diary approach was interesting. In considering approaches to researching self-doubt, I felt there was a valuable contribution that could be made by Systematic Self-

Observation (Rodriguez & Osborn, 2002). This involves making a detailed account of the same phenomenon or event as it is lived and experienced, and could provide a great deal of insight into self-doubt. However, I was interested at this stage in taking a broader view of self-doubt in coaching, and this approach was not suitable for either the research questions or the methodology I had chosen.

### *Interview*

The interview was the approach that would seem to capture best the data that I needed to help understand what self-doubt meant to the participants. Seidman (1991) suggests that gathering personal narratives of events, collecting opinions and stories from those intimately involved, is the only way to get anywhere near the “truth”. Heron (1981) makes the interesting observation that the original paradigm of human inquiry is two people talking and questioning each other, so the interview could be described as a basic mode of inquiry.

However, Sayer (1992) is critical of interviewing, saying that during the course of an interview the eliciting of the person’s responses may inadvertently lead them to revise them as a result of having reflected on them, thereby distorting the results. This was addressed by sending the participants a summary of the interview after it took place, to check that it matched their understanding. This will be discussed again in the section on reliability and validity.

I considered group interviews, but decided that this approach was unlikely to give the openness I sought in this sensitive area. Telephone interviews are also difficult to do well, as Gilham (2000) points out, losing the advantages of rapport and attention that the face to face interview yields. I felt that the face to face interview was likely to be the most effective way of gathering data.

There are three methods by which an interview can be conducted. These are:

- Structured
- Unstructured
- Semi-structured

In comparing the different methods, Smith & Osborn (2003) suggest that the structured approach has the advantages of control, speed and reliability. The disadvantages are that it puts a constraint on what the participant can talk about. This might mean that valuable data could be missed. The structured approach also limits opportunities for complexity or ambiguity to be discussed as it arises.

The unstructured interview had its appeal, but it might not elicit the information I needed. It would also make it difficult to make comparisons between different sets of data when I came to analyse the interview content.

Smith & Osborn (2003) state that the semi-structured interview is the means by which most IPA data are collected. It allows the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue, but also gives the flexibility to modify the questions during the interview and explore other interesting and important areas as they arise. Drever (1995) also suggests that the flexibility of the semi-structured interview allows the researcher to explore in depth the participants' experiences, motivations and explore ambiguities. Gilham (2000) makes the additional point that the semi-structured interview allows for a degree of standardisation that is essential for content analysis. It also yields rich data. However, Drever (1995) points out that it assumes that the interviewer and the participant have a common frame of reference, so that the structure of the interview makes sense to the other person. The assumption I made here was that the format of the semi-structured interview would be familiar to all the participants, and I briefed them in advance that this would be the approach I was taking.

A disadvantage of semi-structured interviews is that the time it takes to carry them out places restrictions on the number that can be conducted. As Drever (1995) points out, this means that the number of people interviewed will make the results too small for statistical significance. I did not consider this an issue. I was not looking for statistical credibility, but for a depth of explanation in a particular context.

### **Design and implementation of semi-structured interviews**

Chenail states that in the relationship between the researcher and the reader of the research report, the data should have a starring role; "the quality in a qualitative



research project is based upon how well you have done at collecting quality data” (1995, p. 2).

I decided to pay a good deal of attention to how the data were collected. There were two reasons for this. Firstly it was important to me, in line with my values, that the people from whom I was collecting the data were treated with sensitivity and respect. The second practical advantage of this approach was that it was likely to yield better quality data. Denscombe (2002) makes the point that trust and goodwill are important resources that help the researcher gather valid information. Participants who trust the researcher and also feel positive about the aims of the research are more likely to be open in the way they answer the questions, and therefore supply richer and more accurate data.

I turned to the coaching literature for references on self-doubt to inform my questions. There were few references, but I was able to identify a number of themes by exploring the literature in associated fields, such as counselling, psychology and psychotherapy, and by reflecting on my experience of self-doubt, both as an individual and in coaching other people. These themes formed the basis of two different interview schedules; one for the interviews with coaches, and the other for interviews with coaching clients (Appx.I, p. 87).

I framed the questions to be as neutral as possible, and to cover the issue of self-doubt from behavioural, cognitive and affective perspectives. I constructed the schedules to follow a logical sequence, and developed additional probe and prompt questions, whilst allowing flexibility to explore other relevant areas as they arose during the interview. The aim was to get as close as possible to what the participant thinks about the subject without being led too much by the questions.

Gilham (2000) states that trialing is important to get the questions right, and piloting to get the interview right. Drever (1995) also makes the point that piloting is essential to give the interview a trial run in realistic conditions. The interview schedules were trialed with two colleagues who have a great deal of professional expertise in coaching, and their comments incorporated. Then the coach’s interview schedule was piloted with a fellow student, who was an experienced coach. I added

one question as a result of the pilot. The schedule for coaching clients had already been piloted in a small study I had carried out a few months previously, so I decided not to repeat this.

The next step was to choose my participants. Smith & Osborn (2003) suggest homogenous sampling for IPA and this seemed an appropriate strategy as I was seeking information from two sets of people with similar experiences. I used my professional network to identify participants. One person was omitted because although she had been coached, her experience of self-doubt had occurred after her coaching programme had finished.

Because of pressures on time, I limited the number of participants to 4 coaches and 4 coaching clients. The disadvantage of this number was that it was too small to enable me to formulate any theories from the results. However, it was likely to give me enough data to identify if any common themes were emerging. I avoided situations where the participants were in a coaching relationship together. Such an approach might appear evaluative rather than interpretivist.

Three of the participants were known to me and five were not. Seidman (1991) indicates that “one shot” meetings with participants who were unknown to the researcher may lack understanding of context. Drever (1995) on the other hand, states that the researcher needs to maintain some distance from the participants, which suggests that familiarity with them may make this more difficult. As I already knew three of the participants, I decided to establish a consistent process by following Seidman’s approach. I attempted to establish a relationship with all the participants by ringing them beforehand to discuss the project and answer any queries they had, and by spending time at the start of each interview finding out a little about the participants’ background. Gilham (2000) makes the point that research begins before the interview, and the quality of the data that the interview yields may depend to an extent on how clear people are about what they are being asked to do.

I decided to use an audio tape recorder to record the interview. There were several benefits to this approach:

- Creswell (1998) stresses the importance of establishing rapport so that participants give good data. This is easier to do when one does not have to break eye contact to make notes.
- Recording the interview overcame the risk of distortion from partial and incomplete notes.
- It also enabled me to record the emotions reflected in the language, and thus helps to address Thomas's (1998) criticism of interviews – that what is said in an interview is actually coded in intonation which can be lost if the researcher depends solely on taking notes.

A week before the interview, each coaching client was sent an outline of the themes that would be covered, so they were coming to the interview with an idea of what we would be discussing (Appx.II, p. 90). I decided against sending them a copy of the schedule in advance, as I wanted the interview to be fresh, rather than run the risk of their responses being influenced through discussion with other people. The coaches, however, were sent the full schedule a week before the interview (Appx.I, p. 87), but with the prompt and probe questions omitted. The intention was to give them some time in advance to recall and reflect on their experiences of dealing with relevant issues of their clients so they might be able to give more detailed responses during the interview.

I asked each participant to suggest a meeting place. McNamara (1999) indicates that people are often most comfortable in their own work setting. Not every participant chose their office, but at least they had control over where the interview took place, and they all chose places they knew. Drever (1995) suggests that people will talk more confidently when they are on their own territory.

Seidman (1991) stresses the nature of the 'I-thou' relationship in the interview – the recognition that the other person is a living, breathing human being. In this respect he sees the interview as a social relationship that must be nurtured and ended gracefully. I took a lot of care over matters such as seating, refreshments, room temperature, as well as building rapport with the participants. Seidman also makes the point that the use of coding or pseudonyms can be a sensitive issue, and I asked each participant if

they wanted to suggest a pseudonym for themselves, or if they were happy for me to choose one for them. I did not want to de-personalise the participants by using initials or numbers.

### **Data analysis**

The participants comprised two female and two male coaches, and two female and two male coaching clients, thus addressing the issue of gender bias. The interviews were between 31 minutes and 66 minutes long, with the average interview lasting about 45 minutes.

The data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), Smith and Osborn (2003). The underlying assumption of this approach is that the researcher wants to learn something about the psychological world of the participants. The emphasis is on the content and complexity of meaning, rather than measurement of frequency. It is not a prescriptive methodology, and it is expected that researchers will adapt it to suit their own way of working.

To gain an understanding of the complexity of meaning, I decided to pay particular attention to the metaphors used by the participants. Tompkins and Lawley (2002) suggest “our personal metaphors and symbols help us make sense of the world” (p. 6). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe the essence of metaphor as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p. 5). By exploring the metaphors that the participants used to describe their experiences, I hoped to understand their psychological world more fully.

In keeping with Byrne’s (2001) emphasis on the importance of documenting the analytical processes and procedures fully and truthfully, so that others may evaluate the credibility of the researcher and the findings, I have outlined the steps I took to analysing the data below:

- The audio tapes from the interviews were transcribed (by audio typists or myself). The transcriptions reproduced the interviews as faithfully as possible, punctuated appropriately to aid understanding. An example of a transcript is given in Appx.III, p. 91.

- I checked the transcripts against the tapes for accuracy and to note stress on words, laughter etcetera. This also gave me an overview of the content.
- I numbered the pages and lines on each transcript to aid analysis.
- The transcripts were split into two data sets, coaches and clients.
- I then read each transcript individually a number of times, noting in the margin anything interesting or significant. I endeavoured to approach each transcript with an open mind, to avoid prejudging the new script with ideas from the last. It is unlikely that I fully succeeded in this, but my awareness of the possibility of bias may have lessened it to an extent.
- I re-read my margin notes, and began to cluster these into themes on flip chart paper, checking that they were grounded in the content of the interview. Each transcript was approached in this manner.
- Finally I clustered the themes into groups for each of the two data sets. I looked at what struck me from these themes, which was not necessarily immediately obvious from the data. This was a valuable exercise, as in doing this I identified an important theme emerging from the clients' data set, that I had not picked up from the analysis: the importance to the client of the relationship with the coach.
- At this stage I decided which themes I would focus upon, which was guided to a large extent by my research question. These themes were recorded on my computer, noting under each theme the line numbers of significant comments, metaphors, and particularly rich or illuminating passages. An example of the analysis is given in Appx.IV, p. 103.
- Finally I stepped back to take an overview of the themes from the whole data set, to see if any particular patterns were emerging.

Laid out as a series of bullet points, the process seems somewhat dry and straightforward. However, as Cresswell (1998) points out, the qualitative analysis involves the researcher immersing herself in the data and is far from linear. This could be summed up by a note in my research diary at this time: "Still feel in a bit of a muddle, but so be it! I seem to be moving forward, albeit messily."

There was also a good deal of emotion involved; my participants were enthusiastic and had given freely of their time for the interviews, but inevitably I could not include

everything. The very richness of the material presented problems; another entry in my research diary, during the process of winnowing the data, notes: “I feel a sense of mourning for what I have to leave out....”.

### **Ethics**

The Oxford Brookes University Ethics Review Checklist was completed and submitted during the early stages of the project (Appx.V, p. 105). The nature of the research did not need ethics approval. The participants were sent an Information Sheet and Consent Form beforehand, outlining the purpose of the research, briefing them on confidentiality and anonymity, and asking for permission for the content of the interview to be used in the research (Appx.VI, p. 106). The Information Sheet also indicated that the research was being conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society’s Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants.

### **Data storage**

Security of materials was a prime consideration. Neither the audio tapes nor the computer were accessible to other people. Some tapes were transcribed by a third party, but the participants were not identifiable from the content.

### **Reliability and validity**

Mason (2002) defines reliability as the accuracy of research methods and techniques. This was partly addressed by audio-taping and transcribing the interviews, thus overcoming the errors and biases that can occur in note-taking. Full transcripts of the interviews are available to the reader.

In addressing the nature of validity in qualitative research, Robson (2002) describes it as “being something to do with it being accurate, or correct, or true” (p. 170). These are difficult areas in qualitative research. I preferred to address this issue by a process of verification. Wolcott (1990) suggests that validity in qualitative research can distract from understanding the described experience. For this reason I have been guided by Creswell (1998), who suggests using the alternative term “verification”, as a way of establishing the credibility of the study through trustworthiness and authenticity.

I was aware that as an interviewer, however much I tried to minimise distortion, I would inevitably be part of how the participants were reconstructing their experience. As Seidman (1998) points out, one has to accept that the interviewer is part of the interviewing picture. The research diary helped me to reflect on and acknowledge at least some of the biases and distortions I could potentially bring to the research.

Following Cresswell's guidance, after the analysis I attempted to gain a real sense of the whole database by summarising each transcript. This also provided me with my first method for verifying the findings, to check that the meaning I was making of the transcripts was in line with what my participants were saying. So I sent a summary of the interview to each participant, and asked for their comments on whether they saw it as an accurate record. Tony was typical in the enthusiasm of his response: "I have now read this a couple of times and cannot believe how true it is, not in the raw transcript, but in the sentiments I was expressing." An example of an interview summary is given in Appx.VII, p. 109.

I carried out further verification checks. I sent a full transcript from each data set to a colleague and a fellow student, and asked them to identify what they saw as the main themes. This provided a degree of triangulation in checking that the themes I had identified were visible to others as well, thus attempting to address the issue of bias, and also to see if I had overlooked anything. The results indicated a good deal of similarity between the themes I had identified and those identified by my verifiers.

Before beginning to write up my research, as a final verification check, I summarised the key findings and sent them to the participants for further comment (Appx.VIII, p. 111).

Internal coherence and presentation of evidence are two important criteria in verifying the reliability of qualitative research (Smith, 1996). In order to meet these conditions, each theme presented in this report will be supported by original extracts from the interview transcripts.

### **Summary of the methodology**

To answer the research question it was necessary to gain an understanding of the meaning of self-doubt to the participants. Therefore the interpretivist paradigm was

adopted. In order to explore the lived experience of the participants, a phenomenological approach was the most appropriate. The participants comprised four coaches and four coaching clients, who were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. The interviews were transcribed, and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, aimed at understanding self-doubt from the experience of the participants. The analysis was verified using a number of checking procedures.

The next two chapters focus on the findings revealed by the data analysis. The first chapter explores the findings in relation to people's experience of self-doubt. The second chapter explores the findings in relation to strategies to overcome self-doubt.



## **Chapter Four: Presentation of Findings**

### **How do people experience self-doubt in the coaching context?**

#### **The participants**

Pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity. At the start of each interview I asked the participants for a brief description of their career history. A short biography of each participant is given in Appx. IX, p. 114.

#### ***The coaches***

Four coaches were interviewed for the research project: two men, Simon and Philip, and two women, Helen and Julia.

#### ***The clients***

Four clients were interviewed for the research project: two men, Tony and Graham and two women, Angela and Anne.

To aid the reader, each participant is referred to in the text as **Coach (name)** or **Client (name)**.

#### **Introduction to presentation of findings**

The data analysis revealed a number of themes. It was difficult to make choices about which themes to leave in, and which had to be omitted because of space. I decided to explore those that I felt were significant or interesting in relation to exploring the research questions, and also what I thought might be of interest to the wider coaching community. I also took into account what might be useful in terms of practicing as a coach in working with clients on issues of self-doubt.

This chapter covers the first research question:

How do people experience self-doubt in the coaching context?

It aims to gain a greater understanding of the nature of self-doubt as a lived experience.

To provide a framework for presenting the findings and exploring the themes, I have structured the chapter into the following sections:

- Descriptions of self-doubt
- Presentation of self-doubt to the coach
- Triggers for self-doubt
- The effects of self-doubt on the individual
- The effects of self-doubt on work performance
- The coaches' experience of self-doubt.

Chapter Five addresses the second research question:

What strategies have coaches adopted to help their clients overcome it?

It focuses on strategies that coaches have adopted in overcoming self-doubt. The following areas provide the framework for exploring the themes:

- Strategies used by coaches
- Strategies experienced by clients
- Strategies adopted by coaches to overcome with their own self-doubt.

### Descriptions of self-doubt

In describing self-doubt coaches come from their own personal experience of self-doubt, but also from their observations whilst coaching clients over a number of years in issues connected with self-doubt. Clients lack this wider perspective and tend to draw on their own experience of self-doubt.

#### *Coaches' descriptions of self-doubt*

**Coach Simon** describes it:

*"For me - and of course I'm personalising it – um for me its very much questioning my own - either delete as appropriate or whatever - combination of ability, skills, power, knowledge, effectiveness, sense of self even, at profound levels I suppose, you know who am I, what's it all about stuff that can be almost existential, so it can mean lots of different things to different people. I suppose to me personally it could be any combination of those sorts of things from time to time, um.....not usually all at once."*

There does not seem to be much consensus amongst the coaches of what self-doubt is, except that it is an unpleasant experience. The discomfort is expressed in physical terms ("a finger-nail biting wobble" as **Coach Julia** describes it), or using emotional language (which **Coach Philip** describes as "*they feel badly about themselves*", or as **Coach Helen** says "*they're frightened*"), or in cognitive appraisal (which **Coach**

**Deleted:** <#>Each section is divided into two sub-sections, where the results are explored first from the coaches' perspective, and then from the experience of the clients, with discussion of the themes that emerge. At the end of each section is a summary of the findings, with an overview at the end of the chapter. ¶

**Simon** depicts as “*who am I, what’s it all about*”). It seems to emerge as a spectrum of experience that varies in breadth and depth from the “*wobble*” (which may be momentarily unpleasant) to more profound questions about one’s own identity. This lack of a common definition is perhaps not surprising, given **Coach Simon’s** statement that self-doubt can mean “*lots of different things to different people*”.

**Coach Helen** expresses it as:

*“To me it means people who have lost confidence in something, often it’s because they’ve been promoted and they don’t believe they’re worthy of that promotion, and they’re frightened about what the implications are in terms of whether they’ll be able to fulfil what the job description is and the competences, and also perform to their own satisfaction as well.”*

Although there appears to be little agreement about the meaning of self-doubt, certain characteristics emerge. **Coach Helen** gives an example of it occurring because a person has been promoted, whilst **Coach Julia** suggests that a big piece of work can trigger it. This indicates that the coaches regard self-doubt as a phenomenon that is caused by a particular incident, and may be transient rather than persistent. The comments from the coaches also suggest that self-doubt is connected to the need for external validation (fulfilling job descriptions and competencies) and internal validation (performing to one’s own satisfaction).

### ***Clients’ descriptions of self-doubt***

In the previous section, the coaches described self-doubt as meaning different things to different people. Therefore I am analysing each client’s description of self-doubt, rather just taking one extract to represent the group.

**Client Angela** describes self-doubt as:

*“...those moments where you don’t believe that you have what it takes to do something that you want to do...”*

She also says:

*“...I tend to have it mainly at work. It’s mainly a work-driven emotional reaction for me...”*

**Client Angela**’s description of a “*work-driven emotional reaction*” suggests that although the evaluation appears to be cognitive, the effects of that evaluation may be emotional. She also indicates that she has the desire to carry out a task, but believes that she may be lacking what is needed in some unspecified way.

**Client Graham** sees it as:

*“...a concern that I don’t have the skills or the knowledge or the experience um to cope with the situation successfully. And that in some way I will be - any such lack would be exposed...”*

Asked to clarify if this was connected with work, **Client Graham** replied:

*“Yes yes that’s an interesting observation, I had automatically thought of work.”*

**Client Graham** is more specific about what he lacks, but the reaction is similar. His use of the term “*exposed*” suggests that he would prefer it to remain hidden and therefore unnoticed.

**Client Tony** describes self doubt as:

*“...a mind-set. You either get yourself into or you’re pushed into where your self confidence is eroded and it can manifest itself through either your work or personal life where you just don’t have the comfort that what you’re doing is good enough or that you can do it.”*

He also sees it as a “*...slippery slope, possibly into depression because nothing was happening, it wasn’t going in the direction that I wanted...*”

**Client Tony** refers to self-doubt in cognitive terms, as a “*mindset*”. However, the reaction appears to be emotional (“*possibly depression*”). He may experience it at work or in his personal life. There is a suggestion through the metaphors and expressions that **Client Tony** uses (“*slippery slope*”, “*it wasn’t going in the direction that I wanted*”) that at times self-doubt may be connected to feeling a loss of control over events, that he may on occasion be “*pushed into*”.

**Client Anne** sees herself as confident outside work. However, she explains that:

*“... the times that I’ve experienced self-doubt within a professional capacity range massively from clinical treatments um with the patients and clinical reasoning and making the right um treatment paths for those patients but also as a manager about*

*um managing well and knowing that I can do the job. So when I started two years ago I think I experienced lots of confidence issues um er about my ability to do it um but I don't experience that now."*

**Client Anne** is referring to a past experience, when she was new to the role, and connects her self-doubt to that specific time,

There appears to be some agreement among the clients in describing self-doubt. They all indicate a strong connection between self-doubt and work. They see it as a concern over their possible lack of knowledge, skills and abilities, in terms of where they are and where they want to be. There may also be a desire to hide it.

The words that they use describe self-doubt as a disagreeable experience (lack of comfort, depression). It is depicted as a cognitive process, involving an evaluation of oneself, and also the possible evaluation of the Self by others. The effects of this evaluation, however, may be emotional.

Other characteristics of self-doubt emerge from analysis of the passages. It is described as transient ("*those moments*", "*I don't experience that now*"), and related to specific external events ("*the situation*", "*making the right treatment paths*", "*managing well*"). The descriptions of self-doubt as a "*belief*", a "*mindset*", a "*concern*", implies that the clients are aware that self-doubt may be based on a perception of a situation rather than solid facts.

### ***Summary of descriptions of self-doubt***

Although both coaches and clients refer to self-doubt and work, the clients are more specific than the coaches in regarding self-doubt as a work-related phenomenon. The clients are of course relating this to their own experience of self-doubt, whilst the coaches are taking a broader perspective, in drawing on their experience of coaching a range of people. This wider view is crystallised in **Coach Simon's** statement that people can experience self-doubt differently.

Both coaches and clients describe self-doubt using cognitive and affective terminology, and both groups see it as triggered by particular events, and occurring at

certain times, rather than being persistent. Causes for self-doubt are starting to emerge from both groups, such as negative evaluation of oneself and concern over the judgement of others. There is an indication from one client that it may be connected to a feeling of not being in control. The clients also suggest that self-doubt may be based on beliefs rather than facts. This is perhaps not surprising, given that all of the clients have been coached in overcoming self-doubt, and are likely to have had their perceptions challenged by their coaches.

Certain threads are beginning to emerge that have already been identified as themes, such as triggers for self-doubt and self-doubt at work. But before these are explored the next section looks at how clients present self-doubt to the coach.

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#### **Presentation of self-doubt to the coach**

Having reviewed how clients experienced self-doubt, I was interested in exploring how self-doubt was presented during coaching. For instance, were clients prepared to be open about it, or did the coach need to draw it out? I also wanted to explore if there was any difference between the genders in presenting self-doubt.

#### ***Coaches experience of clients' presenting self-doubt***

**Coach Julia** makes the point that:

*"Females, in my experience, volunteer it much more readily and usually very quickly. Men skirt around it. God, I do hate generalising but it does tend to be true. I think again a woman would often volunteer it, some do even at the first session, whereas a guy would tend to take two or three."*

It seems then, that women will be prepared to talk about self-doubt early in the coaching programme, and without much probing. However, even with women, it is not necessarily raised as the initial problem.

**Coach Philip** says:

*“...it isn’t the presenting problem very often but it’s whether or not that person uncovers it and calls it that. Or is even aware that it really is an issue about how they feel about themselves.”*

This indicates that not only are clients reluctant to have self-doubt as an overt coaching objective initially, but they may not call it that. There is also a suggestion that it is seen as hidden, and the clients themselves may not be aware of it.

**Coach Simon** comments:

*“I think that my experience of working with women executives is that they’re much more open to, much more aware of self and able to take the risk however low or high it might seem to be able to disclose and explore things. Men quite often sort of, harrumph, I’m fine, you know...which is kind of partly socialisation I think in terms of men, and how we think we’re expected to behave.”*

Here **Coach Simon** suggested that the women executives he has coached are more self-aware, and prepared to risk being open. Men find this more difficult, and this may be partly because of the expectations society place upon masculine behaviour.

**Coach Helen** also noticed differences in how men and women present self-doubt:

*“I think the men cover it up and it emerges later ...I do find I have to tease it out of the men more than the women because the women will come in and just say, oh this is what I feel.”*

**Coach Helen’s** use of the expression “tease it out” again suggests that self-doubt is hidden, particularly in men, and the initiative in identifying it may need to come from the coach. Women seem to be more open to disclosing their emotions.

Two issues emerge here. One is that clients may not present self-doubt as an issue themselves, and when they do they may use other words. The coaches as a group are sensitive to the language used by their clients, and try to tune in to the client’s vocabulary. The second issue of particular interest, though, is the difference observed by *all* the coaches in how men and women present self-doubt.

It seems that self-doubt may not be the presenting problem for either men or women. However, the coaches all remark on the difference between how men and women

present self-doubt. The language the coaches use to describe the difference are strikingly similar. The women are “*open...to disclose and explore*”, are more willing to say “*this is what I feel*”, “*volunteer it much more readily*”. The metaphors used to describe how men present self-doubt are related more to something hidden. They “*skirt around it*”, “*cover it up*”, the coach has to “*tease it out*”. The comment **Coach Simon** makes about men and socialisation indicates that they may be more inclined to feel embarrassed about it, and therefore reluctant to admit to it. The fact that later in the coaching sessions men seem more prepared to discuss self-doubt, suggests that they may need to feel safe in the relationship with the coach before raising such difficult issues.

#### ***How the clients present self-doubt to coaches***

In the previous section the coaches indicated that, in their experience, men are reluctant to discuss self-doubt early on in the coaching relationship. Of course, there will always be exceptions to this, as is illustrated here.

Of the two male clients, **Client Tony** was aware of self-doubt and the effect it was having on his well-being. He expressed a willingness to discuss self-doubt with his coach, C, from the outset:

*“...I raised it with him because I was very conscious of it because it can have such an effect on you, lack of sleep, you don’t get things done, you become lethargic etc...I said to C, look I’ve got no expectations, I hadn’t been given any brief about what you’re meant to do etcetera etcetera but if there’s anything you can do for me is help me recover my self confidence because generally I am or I work at being reasonably confident.”*

**Client Tony** appears to see self-doubt as a state that is untypical for him. In his experience he is a reasonably self-confident person, so he identified the physical and emotional effects he was experiencing as being connected to self-doubt, and wanted to recover what he had lost.

**Client Graham**, on the other hand, was much more reluctant to discuss it, and there is a sense that he was not fully aware that it was an issue for him. It surfaced in response to careful questioning by his coach, who did not understand why he was presenting an issue to her that she felt he could address without her help:



*“... here I was presenting this concern, which seemed probably on the face of it too little, too small... So by asking – taking - this position of I don’t understand, why, what’s going on there was a definite sort of hiatus. It was um I sort of almost as if I had been found out, my self doubt had been discovered and there was a sense of oh blimey, and I think I actually said to her, ’ (laughing) God preserve me from perceptive people, cos I did feel found out. As if damn, you know, here I am again. So then we got into what the real issues um were...”*

The metaphors in this extract reflect self-doubt as hidden, it was “*discovered*”, “*found out*”. There is also a sense of shock (“*oh blimey*”), and although he was amused at his recollection of the event, there is also an indication in his comment “*God preserve me from perceptive people*” that he was not too comfortable with it being brought into the open. It also appears, unlike **Client Tony**, that for **Client Graham** self-doubt was a state he had experienced before (“*here I am again*”).

The two women, **Client Anne** and **Client Angela**, seem to have both been proactive in raising self-doubt with their coaches. They had identified it as an issue that might affect their transition into new roles, and wanted to address it.

For example, **Client Angela** explained her experience with her coach:

*“I think I think it was a (stumbles) particular situation where I thought, knowing myself as well as I did, um that I was going to find it perhaps quite difficult to manage the transition and I wanted - it was very important to me to manage it effectively and to be able to speed fast in the new job and I (coughs) and actually the self-doubt was one of the big things that made me feel I need some help with this because that could just keep me in the wrong place.”*

In a way **Client Angela’s** stance in raising self-doubt with her coach was similar to **Client Tony’s**, in that both of them recognised it and wanted to address it. However, the difference between the two is that **Client Tony** saw self-doubt as a new experience for him and raised it because he wanted to recover his normal level of self-confidence, whereas **Client Angela** appeared to have experienced self-doubt before, and raised it because it could “*keep me in the wrong place.*”

The excerpts illustrate once again that self-doubt can be a hidden phenomenon, which may not be obvious, even to the client. However, the analysis also suggests that clients regard it as a major issue (“*a big thing*”) that could hinder progress, and could be addressed through coaching.

#### ***Summary of the presentation of self-doubt to the coach***

Whilst being interviewed, **Coach Philip** made a general point when he said: “...*there is still a great deal of stigma attached to any kind of um anxiety...or people kind of struggling in one way or another to deal with what they’re facing.*” If this is the case, then it is understandable that clients may be reluctant to present issues of self-doubt openly, seeing it was a weakness, particularly the men, who may, because of socialisation, place more importance than women on appearing emotionally robust.

An important issue here appears to be the coach’s knowledge and understanding of the client and being alert to issues that may not be openly revealed. Another emerging theme is an awareness amongst the clients of the negative effects of self-doubt, and this will be reviewed in greater depth in the section exploring the effects of self-doubt and performance at work.

It appears that self-doubt is triggered by specific events or situations such as a new position or a new boss. It is identified as one end of a continuum, with self-doubt at one end, and more profound effects at the other. It seems to be perceived as transient, and although the situation that triggers self-doubt seems to be appraised cognitively, the effects are emotional. Men appear to be more reluctant to present it to their coaches than women. The metaphors used by both coaches and clients suggest that it may be connected to a feeling of lack of control over events. There is also a suggestion that it is seen hidden, at times from clients themselves, but also from the outer world.

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#### **Triggers for self-doubt**

A new situation or a new boss has already emerged as possible triggers for self-doubt. This section explores in greater depth what the participants saw as the main causes of self-doubt.

### ***Coaches' descriptions of triggers for self-doubt***

Triggers for self-doubt were described as varying from person to person, and the coaches saw part of their role as understanding the triggers for each client. Although the coaches were conscious of people having different triggers, it seemed from their perspective that certain situations were common in creating self-doubt.

**Coach Simon** described a number of different triggers:

*“...I think taking on a new job is a common one, I think also having a new boss is another. People have been doing incredibly well and then the structure has changed, which it seems to be all the time, you get a new boss who has a very different way of operating and they suddenly start to think, I don't know if I'm doing it the way he expects, and should I be, or should I just do my own thing and is this what he or she wants, so I think that's a common one... Change of boss, change of job, or restructuring in the organisation generally. I mean there's a lot of that goes on, and people are then kind of thrown up in the air in terms of not knowing what their future is and whether they have a job or not.”*

Change and key transitions appear to be major influences in creating self-doubt in their clients. Difficulties in relationships at work were also seen as a trigger. Lack of clarity was also an issue – unclear expectations or uncertainty.

**Coach Helen** said that:

*“it does seem to come about when they're in transition...that's probably when self-doubt releases itself, it's when it comes to the surface.”*

The triggers here seem to be associated with a shifting of the old certainties, when one might experience a sense of ambiguity. The metaphors here are revealing: **Coach Simon** used the term *“thrown up in the air”*, which suggests that the person is having something done to them by someone else, which is unexpected and provokes a feeling of helplessness. In some ways it is similar to the metaphor (*“slippery slope”*) that **Client Tony** used, which was discussed on p. 44 in the previous section. Both indicate a loss of physical control, but also suggest a deeper sense of vulnerability. **Coach Helen's** reference to times when *“self-doubt releases itself and comes to the*

*surface*” could indicate that self-doubt has a life of its own over which the individual has no control; it is always present, ready to emerge in particular circumstances.

The coaches saw self-doubt as triggered by ambiguity in some form. The metaphors reveal feelings of lack of control, a sense of vulnerability. Self-doubt is seen as hidden, coming to the surface in times of uncertainty.

#### ***Clients’ descriptions of triggers for self-doubt***

The clients all identified transitions as a trigger for self-doubt. For example, **Client Graham** talks about the difficulties of trusting himself in a new situation, and feeling it is “*really scary*”:

*“... in new situations you know, I say...I think it’s probably there’s more doubt than there should be. We,I once I’ve done it and do it again that’s fine, I certainly trust myself, but its just that first situation, its like reversion to childhood and new circumstances.”*

He continued by describing how he felt once he had developed confidence in the new situation:

*“...it doesn’t seem to build into other areas. I would still have the same level of doubt in another new area, so I’m not gaining in absolute terms”.*

**Client Tony’s** comments are slightly different:

*“...I’ve always gone into – particularly at work – into a new role with a fairly high degree of confidence that I can get on with it....knowing what I want to achieve helps draw me away from this analysis paralysis....It’s when you’re given a piece of work and you’ve no idea where it’s going to go you end up analysing it to death.”*

It appears that **Client Graham** and **Client Tony** approach new work with different states of mind. **Client Graham** appears to need to gain experience in each new situation to feel confident, and that level of confidence does not transfer into a different area. **Client Tony**, however, sees himself as self-confident in a new role, except when he is unclear about its direction and what he wants to achieve. What they seem to have in common, however, is a feeling of helplessness in the way they respond to self-doubt. **Client Graham’s** reference to “*reversion to childhood*” may reflect his feeling of vulnerability – as a child might in a new situation when they are

unsure how to behave or what is expected from them. **Client Tony** also suggests a feeling of powerlessness in his description of “*analysis paralysis*”, and “*analysing it to death*”.

**Client Angela** makes a comment about being the wrong person for the job:

*“I think back to last year when it was going through all this change and just feeling that....oh there was the bit about oh they’ve got the wrong person for the job, you know, and um....I remember at that point just feeling very low and easily moved to tears at home, and my poor husband thinking ‘What am I doing here?’ And then I said ‘Look it’s not you I’m just....I feel very frail at the moment like a child, so I think a bit of a feeling of vulnerability, which I don’t like feeling. I like to be in control...”*

There is an indication from **Client Angela** that she feels the wrong person may have been chosen for the job. She describes how she reacted emotionally to the situation in her use of words such as “*feeling very low*”, and “*easily moved to tears*”, and, like **Client Graham**, she uses imagery of childhood. She is explicit in relating this to “*a bit of a feeling of vulnerability*”, and being “*very frail*”, which suggests that she is experiencing a physical as well as an emotional susceptibility. In contrasting this with her preference for being in control, this suggests that in the situation she was describing she was feeling a lack of control. It is also clear from **Client Angela’s** description that her feelings about her situation at work were spilling over into her private life, and potentially into her relationships outside work.

#### *Evaluation of Self*

This was an area that was touched on by the coaches, but was raised more specifically by the clients. Evaluation as a trigger for self-doubt appeared to fall into three broad areas:

Negative evaluation of the Self against others

Negative evaluation of the Self by others

Negative evaluation of the Self by the Self.

##### 1. Negative evaluation of Self against others

This process could be described as comparing oneself unfavourable with another person or people. **Client Graham** described self-doubt being triggered by:

*“...people that display the levels of competence which I might aspire to and and if I compare myself with them thinking oh crikey. It’s a bit like that syndrome if you’re a speaker at a conference and you have to follow the person who brought the house down and you think oh goodness yea how am I going to match that and it’s a bit of that sort that sort of feeling.”*

**Client Angela** made a similar point:

*“Some people are amazingly good at thinking on their feet – phenomenal. And I wish I was better at it than I am, but I’m not particularly good at it, particularly if it’s an area that I’m not.... If I...it’s an area of expertise then I’m very comfortable, but lots of the things I get involved with are not areas of expertise, so they...those people I can find quite intimidating.”*

An interesting element here may be the person who is the focal point of the evaluation. In the extracts, both **Client Graham** and **Client Angela** are comparing themselves to people who they perceive to be “*amazingly good*”, “*phenomenal*”, “*brought the house down*”. The terms they use are quite extreme in the degree of proficiency they assign to these individuals. It is perhaps not surprising that Client Graham feels “*how am I going to match that?*” and Client Angela find them “*quite intimidating*”.

## 2. Negative evaluation of Self by others

This process involves the effect of the Self being criticised by another person. **Client Tony** described the effects when he was doing a good job:

*“...but you’ve got a superior who’s constantly telling you that’s its rubbish, always negative, negative, negative, negative. It ultimately gets to you and you can’t help it but you start to transfer that to your home life, because you carry it with you. It’s something that’s inside you, I had some fairly long periods where I was really not happy. In fact I was quite ill at one point.”*

Earlier in this chapter, the relationship with the boss emerged as a trigger for self-doubt. Here **Client Tony** clearly described the consequences of a poor relationship on his feelings about himself, of being undermined by his manager and the effect that had on his confidence.

The repetitive use of the word “*negative*” indicates the strength of emotion expressed in the extract, giving the effect of being beaten down, as if the negative message was continually being hammered in. **Client Tony’s** description suggests that he is unable to shake off the feeling that the negative message induces, and because “*it’s something that’s inside you*”, it is internalised, and therefore travels with him into his home life as well. Implicit in his description is the effect this has on his happiness, and ultimately on his health.

### 3. Negative evaluation of Self by Self

This area indicates an evaluation of the Self and a feeling that what one can offer is inadequate against an internal point of reference. **Client Graham** describes it as a difficulty in meeting his own standards in a new situation:

*“... that yea gap between where I want to be and a concern where I might end up and the doubt is, can I achieve the standard which both I would aspire to and in terms of my coaching would want er want er for the individual.”*

This suggests that **Client Graham** has a clear idea of the standard that he wants in his coaching both for himself and for his clients, and has a desire to achieve that standard, but is unsure if he will be able to meet it. The gap between what he is motivated to aspire to, and where he may end up, leads to self-doubt.

#### ***Summary of triggers for self-doubt***

In describing the effects of new and ambiguous situations, the clients identify similar triggers to self-doubt as the coaches. It seems that a new job, a new relationship, changes in structure and lack of clarity can all lead to feelings of self-doubt. The metaphors they use describe feelings of helplessness and loss of control, which are expressed for instance in references to childhood. Other powerful images suggest that self-doubt is deep and hidden. The effect of self-doubt on emotional state emerge as a consequence of self-doubt. Further triggers for self-doubt emerge that were not identified by the coaches, connected with negative evaluation by, or in comparison with, other people, or against an inner standard.

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### **The effects of self-doubt on the individual**

The effects of self-doubt on emotional and physical well-being were beginning to emerge from the last section. This section explores this area in more detail.

#### ***Coaches' descriptions of the effects of self-doubt***

Coaches saw self-doubt as having a physical effect on clients. **Coach Philip** described this effect on his clients:

*"Um for some clients its physical and it's around things like palpitations, anxiety attacks, sweating... um but for others it's more of a kind of withdrawal."*

The physical reactions are similar to those associated with stress, whilst "withdrawal" may have additional meanings. **Coach Philip** expanded this later when he described a woman client going *"back into her shell and become very emotional"*. The shell may be seen as a protective device, but also as a place where one can hide, particularly if one does not want to display one's emotions.

**Coach Julia** made a similar observation about clients' reactions:

*"They might describe feeling very small, insignificant, invisible that um, I suppose the TA "you're OK, I'm not OK" kind of stuff, other people seem all powerful, other people's expectations and it's that comparison and they see themselves as less than somebody or something else – a deficiency."*

The metaphors here are rich, with words such as *"insignificant"*, *"invisible"*, *"a deficiency"* reflecting the notion that people feel in some way diminished and powerless. The theme of helplessness seems to be prevalent here, particularly in comparison with what appear to be *"all powerful"* other people.

#### ***The clients' descriptions of the effects of self-doubt***

The clients also described the physical effects of self-doubt. Tiredness, disturbed sleep, over-eating, were all identified as associated with self-doubt.

**Client Tony** describes how, when he's experiencing self-doubt:

*"...I have been aware of being slightly withdrawn so moving back into your shell to your little comfort zone where you can perform and you know you're performing rather than going over the barrier to an area where you might be open to criticism."*



**Client Tony's** description of "*comfort zone*" suggests a space where he is confident in what he is doing. Outside the certainty of this space, the description of withdrawal mirrors **Coach Philip's** description on p. 56. In a stressful situation, one coping mechanism for some people may be to withdraw. "*Going over the barrier*", as **Client Tony** describes it, would mean moving into uncharted territory, and therefore leave one vulnerable and exposed to criticism (without one's shell for protection).

#### ***Summary of the effects of self-doubt on the individual***

Self-doubt is seen as having a physical effect on clients, in that they may exhibit stress-related symptoms. The imagery here is associated with withdrawal, hiding, and the need for protection, suggesting that clients may feel exposed and vulnerable. Further imagery is associated with feelings of insignificance, reflecting a lack of influence in comparison with other people who appear more powerful.

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#### **The effects of self-doubt on work performance**

The previous section explored the effects of self-doubt on the individual. It seems that self-doubt can affect the way clients feel, and also have a physical and emotional impact as well. This section examines whether self-doubt was perceived as influencing performance at work.

#### ***Coaches' descriptions of the effects on work performance***

Coaches saw clients' emotions possibly affecting their thinking, and also a reluctance at times for clients (more frequently amongst men) to recognise and deal with their emotional responses. They also observed that physical manifestations associated with self-doubt could adversely affect performance:

#### **Coach Helen :**

*"Well sometimes a couple of people have said they actually felt sick because they felt so anxious. That they didn't think they'd be able to perform, and that has taken over their attention so it's become a self fulfilling prophesy. But they haven't done their work well because they're so much focussed on their anxiety that they haven't been able to do it, certainly that. It's blocked their thinking sometimes, people who normally would think very clearly, they have said because they've experienced this*

*overwhelming self doubt that it has made them unable to think it, it freezes almost it does freeze them.”*

It seems that a number of issues associated with self-doubt can affect clients' performance at work. It may be physical (feeling sick), it may inhibit their ability to think, and the anxiety generated by the self-doubt can take their attention away from their work, and thus adversely affect performance. The metaphors the **Coach Helen** uses to describe the effects “*blocked their thinking*” and “*it does freeze them*” indicate that she sees the effects as static rather than dynamic. This might suggest that self-doubt is seen as immobilising them in some way.

However, self-doubt is not always seen in a negative light, as **Coach Simon** describes:

*“I think actually self doubt can be quite a useful model in terms of getting me to question and to think about...as long as it doesn't start to undermine my confidence...”*

#### ***Clients' descriptions of the effects on work performance***

The clients felt that self-doubt affected how others perceived them, and that it led to procrastination and wasting time. In the extract below, **Client Anne** described how self-doubt affected her performance at meetings:

*“... for example if I went for a meeting with the Directors, I feel that at times I don't actually get my point across or the point of view for physiotherapist services. So I feel that that would effect decision making at a higher level.”*

This suggests that the repercussions of being unable to express herself at meetings could affect the decision-making process, in that decisions were being made without full information, or without the benefit of her professional opinion.

**Client Angela** tended to procrastinate when she doubted herself, and described how *‘...you put things off and you're not as upbeat maybe as you normally are, so I don't think it can be anything but slightly detrimental.’*

There appear to be two effects for **Client Angela** from this extract, one is related to procrastination, the other to the effect on mood. Both are seen as having a negative effect on performance. However, it is important not to overstate the case here; **Client Angela** sees the effects as “*slightly detrimental*”, which may suggest that although

she feels the discomfort of self-doubt, and possibly quite acutely given her earlier descriptions of herself as feeling “*very frail at the moment like a child*” (p. 53), she does not see this as necessarily having a major impact on her effectiveness at work.

**Client Angela** also makes a further point about the effects of self-doubt taking more of a toll on her than her performance:

“...*I think I am quite good at fronting up...fairly...it’s more about the toll it takes on me as an individual than the performance errors that take place.*”

This is another indication that self-doubt is hidden. In “*fronting up*”, **Client Angela** suggests that she is deliberately masking her doubts, so she may appear more confident than she feels. In doing this, however, she is putting herself under strain.

However, like the coaches, the clients did not necessarily see self-doubt as negative.

**Client Graham** describes self-doubt, or what he goes on to describe as “*a level of proper apprehension*” as helpful in prompting him to prepare for new situations.

**Client Angela** states:

“...*I think self-doubt is useful as a kind of trigger to self-improvement.*”

This suggests that **Client Angela** sees a certain amount of self-doubt as a prompt to self-development. However, she goes on to say:

“*But it’s a risk ‘cos you hope that it goes that way but I guess it can go the other way which is tough. You know, get lost in it really and for it to become a greater problem than it is at the time.*”

#### ***Summary of the effects of self-doubt on work performance***

It seems that self-doubt can affect clients physically and emotionally, and may impact negatively on performance and possibly lead to stress. The extent of that effect is difficult to assess, and is outside the remit of this study. There is also an indication that self-doubt may not always be detrimental. It may be described as a continuum, where at one end it can be slightly motivating, whilst at the other end it could be debilitating.

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### **The coaches' experience of self-doubt**

The coaches I interviewed were asked an optional question regarding their own experience of self-doubt as coaching professionals, which they all answered. My rationale for including this question is that I was interested in exploring self-doubt at work, and whilst coaches are coaching, they are at work.

Just as clients experience doubt in new situations, the early days of coaching can create self-doubt, as **Coach Simon** describes:

*“So I think to begin with working with people I had all sorts of doubts about, did I have enough experience and did I have enough knowledge about their particular business and what was I going to do with them anyway. There was a whole bag of stuff to begin with.”*

**Coach Simon's** reaction is similar to the clients in a new situation, in terms of whether his knowledge and skills were going enable him to be effective as a coach.

It also appeared that working with certain clients can instigate feelings of self-doubt, as **Coach Helen** described:

*“... there was one particular very senior Chief Executive in a broadcasting organisation who I had to coach and he was very challenging person, nasty bit of work, and I found it quite difficult to handle him in a way that I could be constructively helpful, and I did start to doubt whether I could actually be effective with people at that level, and that was one of the triggers that made me think about coming on this course actually.”*

**Coach Simon** makes a similar point in describing a client he had seen recently, who was:

*“incredibly pompous and full of himself and I could imagine that in that sort of situation I would start to think am I doing the right thing? What should I be doing? But I'm already aware that that's likely to happen and I'd be saying to myself, you're doing fine just stay with the process what's going on and just be confident in the relationship.”*

These extracts suggest that the personality or status of the clients on the coaches may trigger feelings of self-doubt. From **Coach Helen's** perspective, the experience had

made her question her ability to coach at that level, whilst **Coach Simon**, who had come across such situations before, was able to anticipate his likely response and deal with it.

### ***Summary of the coaches' experience of self-doubt***

The coaches identified broadly similar triggers to the clients, in that a new role and potentially negative evaluation by others (in this case clients) could lead to self-doubt.

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### **Overview of people's experience of self-doubt in the coaching context.**

In exploring how people express self-doubt in the context of being coached, certain themes have emerged.

#### ***Self-doubt as work-related***

It seems that people experience self-doubt differently, but a common theme is that it is related to work, and that the triggers are likely to be connected with change and ambiguity. At times it may be transient, in that once the new situation becomes familiar, then the self-doubt may lessen. More specifically, a new role, a change of boss, a new organisational structure, are identified as potential triggers. Negative evaluation by others, or by oneself, is also seen as a trigger. Although it was not explored in the same depth, the coaches' experience of self-doubt reflected the experience of the clients, particularly when they were new to coaching (lack of experience) and when they faced the possibility of negative evaluation by a client.

#### ***Self-doubt as an emotional state***

Self-doubt is described in affective terminology. It is identified as part of a continuum, with self-doubt at one end, and low self-esteem at the other. The language that is used to describe how self-doubt affects them is connected to the feelings, which may also impact on the individual physically, or affect their ability to think. The metaphors suggest that self-doubt is connected to feelings of lack of control and helplessness, and these feelings may worsen if not addressed.

### ***Self-doubt and performance at work***

There is a perception that self-doubt may adversely affect work performance, in terms, for example, of decision-making and ability to influence. However, it is also possible that in some instances performance is unaffected, but the anxiety and additional effort that an individual puts into work takes its toll on the person's emotional well-being. Being proactive in addressing self-doubt (as two of the clients were) implies that coaching support during transition may lessen the impact of self-doubt. It is not necessarily seen as a negative experience, and a certain amount of it may be a motivator for self-development.

### ***Self-doubt as hidden***

It seems that self-doubt may not necessarily be the presenting problem, and it may take some time to emerge during coaching. Gender may play a part here, in that in being coached, men seem more reluctant to express it than women. However, outside the coaching sessions, the language to describe self-doubt suggests that it is masked from the outer world, and may not even be recognised by the individual.

This chapter has explored how self-doubt is experienced by both coaches and clients. The next chapter examines strategies used in overcoming it.

## Chapter Five: Presentation of Findings

### What strategies have coaches adopted to overcome self-doubt?

This chapter looks at the strategies used by the coaches in working with their clients on self-doubt, the strategies experienced by the clients, and how coaches deal with their own self-doubt. This is a critical area, because if it is not possible to affect the experience of self-doubt in a positive way, then discussing it becomes an interesting but rather academic exercise. For me, this was an important part of my study, and the area I hoped to learn most from.

#### Strategies used by the coaches

I have divided this section into three areas:

- The range of the strategies used by coaches
- development of their approach over time
- Their relationship with their clients.

#### *The range of strategies used by coaches:*

All the coaches had a range of models, tools and techniques they drew on. They also drew on what interested them, or reflected their experience. *“There’s a lot of stuff in the kitbag”* as **Coach Simon** put it. They all described their approach as client-centred. This is reflected in their approach to coaching; none of them used a prescriptive approach, tailoring the process to the needs of the client.

What clients need is not straightforward, which **Coach Julia** refers to when she described the coach’s role in separating *“...the presenting problem and all the other stuff.”* Self-doubt is not necessarily raised as an issue with coaches at a first meeting, and its hidden nature has been discussed earlier. So it becomes particularly important that the coach is sensitive to what may be underlying the initial conversation. This may come with experience, as **Coach Julia** explains:

*“How do you know initially which notes are the ones that will resonate all the way through? I am better now at letting it emerge and dealing with it.”*

Here **Coach Julia** refers to the importance of really listening to what the client is saying and not drawing conclusions too quickly – to continue her metaphor, listening

to the music behind the words. This leads to understanding the client at a deeper level, as **Coach Julia** explains:

*“I’d always want to go on to understand what context, what patterns there are for this person...I know I’m very eclectic, an eclectic mix, but most of it is really trying to understand what it means for them and the theories of stuff that I have in my own head to just really sort of inform where my questioning is going to go.”*

**Coach Julia** describes a wide range of tools that she can draw on. However, use of questioning is key to the coaching approach, and in **Coach Julia’s** description, the knowledge and expertise that she has built up over the years seem to form a backdrop to the questions. As she puts it, they *“inform where my questioning is going”*. Fundamental to this approach, is gaining a deep understanding of the client’s world.

Coaches may also draw on their own experience in other areas in their coaching practice. For instance, **Coach Helen’s** experience as a parent of a hyperactive child made her alert to the breathing patterns of her clients, and adopt strategies to help clients exhibiting panic breathing to bring it under control.

It may be that each coach, because of their individual experience, is particularly aware of certain aspects of a client’s behaviour. Successfully reading that behaviour, and putting it into context with other behaviours, is part of the skill of coaching. **Coach Julia** is sensitive to her clients’ breathing because of her own experience, and is able to model the slow breathing that she hopes will calm them down.

#### ***Development of their approach over time***

As coaches developed in skill and experience they were more inclined to describe explicitly the greater part played by intuition in their approach.

#### **Coach Helen:**

*“I think the way I was taught to coach first was 1994 a course on Coaching which was a week long and we used the GROW method and I think once I moved away from that, once I started to rely on my own resources and my own intuition I think that’s when I realised that there was much more going on...”*



The models become part of a store of knowledge and experience the coach draws on. Over time it appears that the coach may develop tacit knowledge, which at its best allows the coach to respond flexibly to the client, drawing on what is appropriate for the client in the moment, rather than imposing certain models upon them.

### ***Relationship with clients***

The coaches' approach was client-centred, but it seemed to go beyond that. **Coach Simon** described his relationship with clients in terms of emotional engagement:

*"I get very fond of the people I work with, fond but you know - at a distance, I genuinely care for their development..."*

It seems that **Coach Simon** is aware of the need for objectivity by maintaining some distance, but becomes emotionally engaged with his clients and their progress.

For **Coach Philip**, coaching also stems from his enjoyment of his clients' self-development, describing his interest in coaching as coming: *"from a strong sense of altruism. I think that shows in the practice in that you know, I'm not in this just to make more money"*.

### ***Summary of strategies used by coaches***

The coaches are client-centred in their work with clients. Coaches seem to be using a wide range of approaches, listening carefully to the world the clients' are presenting to them. Questioning may be key in understanding and helping the client. As they become more experienced, it is possible that intuition may play a bigger part, as the coach develops a store of tacit knowledge. The relationship with the client is also important, and the coach may feel and exhibit genuine warmth in relating to the client.

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### **Strategies experienced by the clients**

I have divided this section into two areas:

- The clients experience of strategies used by their coaches
- The clients relationship with their coach

### ***The clients' experience of strategies used by their coaches***

The clients benefited from a number of strategies that their coaches used, including becoming more aware of their self-talk, learning to reflect more and planning and rehearsing before difficult meetings. They were able to learn these strategies and apply these in the workplace. **Client Angela** experienced a coach who took a rather more directive approach that she had experienced before:

*"My next coach was much more prescriptive and much more direct in saying things like, you know, most people have self-doubt, whether you choose to share it with other people is up to you. And she was effectively saying, and it was a wonderful piece of advice, you know, just because you had the self-doubt **don't** share it, because that exacerbates the issue. So that's...I've made quite, some quite big changes in that respect, which has been interesting."*

**Client Angela's** coach was in effect advising her not to disclose the self-doubt, but to keep it hidden. **Client Angela** regarded this as a "wonderful piece of advice" because she put it into effect, with the result that:

*"when I stopped saying things like, oh you know, I'm a generalist I'm not very strong on development, I.....when I stopped saying that, I felt better, um I don't know if other people did, being on the receiving end of it, but certainly you just feel you're giving a very different impression of yourself and your capability. So people come to you for help and they are more likely to ask you for advice."*

By masking her self-doubt and putting on a show of confidence, **Client Angela** felt more effective. She felt she was giving a better impression of herself, and potentially she was being more influential, in that people were coming to her for guidance.

However, the clients did not focus particularly on the strategies that their coaches used when describing the benefits of being coached in self-doubt. What they emphasised most of all was the relationship with their coach, which will be described next.

### ***The clients' relationship with their coach***

**Client Tony** described one of the benefits of having a coach "...because he is completely disconnected from the work environment."

**Client Anne** also valued this objectivity:

*"I just find coaching invaluable really and I particularly feel for me it needs to be somebody outside the organisation and that's because P gives me an objective viewpoint. She also doesn't know me personally. Something else - she makes it very objective. She doesn't know necessary about physiotherapist profession and I find it really useful to get an objective view point on it and she I think she balances me quite a lot."*

It seems for **Client Anne** the objectivity that her coach gave her was valuable because she was not an expert in that profession, she was not a friend or colleague, and therefore she was able to provide a balance to the working environment which was useful.

This objectivity also meant that the coach was able to challenge the client's thinking.

**Client Graham** describes a session with his coach:

*"there's just no point in going in and saying 'oh you know I had this little problem the other day T', well if it's a little problem go away and sort it but if it's a deeper issue then let's talk about the deeper issue."*

The underlying value of the coach in this situation was expressed by **Client Tony**:

*"You'll need somebody to take a step back and be very objective about you as an individual and just understand that every individual has a number of positives which are actually quite difficult to find if you try to do it yourself."*

**Client Tony** found the coaching valuable because he did not believe it was possible to readily identify positive aspects of his character on his own. This may be particularly important if one is doubting oneself, as it may be difficult to see beyond the lack of self-belief into what one has to offer.

Coaching was also valued by the clients because it was seen as a safe place. This is connected to the fact that the coach was external to the organisation, and so it was possible to share thoughts that may be difficult to reveal at work. **Client Angela** describes how important this was to her:

*“But even just having that space to say um (pause) I just don’t think I can do this. Just to be able to say that, because this is again a very tough environment. It’s a great organisation, I want to say that upfront, but it’s a very tough environment, and there’s not much forgiveness around people’s performance taking a dip. So that that creates anxiety as well... There’s not a support group that’s easily identifiable. So it becomes quite difficult to know who can I share that with, so the coach was wonderful, just to be able to dump really and say...you know I don’t know what I’m doing, (laughs) I’m just kind of going from day to day hoping I’m doing the right sort of stuff and you know, this isn’t an environment I could say that to a colleague very easily.”*

**Client Angela** talks on p. 66 about how her coach helped her by advising her not to reveal her self-doubt at work. However, she needed to share it with someone, and here she describes the value of discussing it with her coach. Lack of support in the workplace and the possible effects of anxiety on her performance (*“there’s not much forgiveness around”*) emphasises the importance of a place where she can be open and feel supported. As **Client Anne** describes it:

*“...the thing I value with P is my time. It’s time for me, and actually we talk about me, which is something that your not used to doing I think you give, I give a lot of myself personally to work and to home and all the other issues, and um that’s where I found um really helpful and beneficial to do it.”*

It sounds as if one of the benefits to both **Client Angela** and **Client Anne** is the opportunity to just be themselves in a safe environment.

An important aspect of coaching for all the clients was how they related to their coaches. To an extent this was connected with how the coaches made them feel, as **Coach Anne** describes:

*“I think she points out a huge amount of positive things, so it’s positive reinforcement and building self esteem I think is how I see it. She also helps me to think logically through, so what’s the evidence for that, for feeling like that? You know, how do you feel about how you handled it? And actually helps me not to be negative about experiences and brings out the positive pretty much in everything that I do and take to her.”*

It seems that **Client Anne**'s coach challenged her thinking by questioning her perspective, which she found helpful. But what **Client Anne** found particularly valuable was her coach's positive support.

**Client Angela** presents a similar view:

*"P didn't do anything um as I say, anything overt, didn't tackle the issue, but her whole language and her whole affirmation of me.... I would leave every time thinking I could conquer the world if I wanted to."*

#### ***Summary of strategies experienced by the clients***

The clients were less inclined to describe what had worked for them in terms of particular models or approaches, taking a more pragmatic perspective in relation to what they could immediately use. They would not, in any case, have necessarily been aware of the specific approaches their coaches were using. What emerged most strongly from the clients was the importance of their relationship with their coach and their view of coaching as a safe environment.

They all spoke of their coaches with great warmth and respect. They saw the benefit of the coach being a person from outside work, and therefore able to bring an objective viewpoint. They also saw coaching as a safe place where they were able to spend time talking about, and focusing on, themselves, and issues that were difficult to share at work. They felt supported and affirmed by the coach as people; that the coach saw them in a positive light and believed in them. The coach was also seen as a perceptive person, who knew the client and was able to identify issues that were not immediately obvious and bring them into the client's awareness. Questioning was seen as a powerful tool in that respect. However, it seemed that an important element in the coaching, (perhaps **the** most important), was that the coaches' positive affirmation of them as people resulted in the clients feeling positive about, and valuing, themselves.

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### Strategies used by the coaches to overcome their own self-doubt

Following on from the optional question regarding coaches' own experience of self-doubt, which was discussed on p. 60 of the last chapter, I asked a further optional question on how they addressed it. All the coaches answered the question, which demonstrated the importance to them of being in supervision. **Coach Julia**, for example, in describing difficult coaching situations with clients, says:

*"...I feel OK about that and I know I've got my supervisor to go to".*

However, for **Coach Simon**, self-doubt is not something he specifically brings to supervision:

*"I'm thinking of stuff I take to supervision which is not about self doubt so much as to getting another opinion on something, and talking about a case of somebody I'm working with, and what's presenting and what's going on, and just saying look could I just talk through what I've been doing, you know. Are there better ways, are there different ways, I could have handled that or any thoughts? So we actually put it on the table, turn it round and look at it, but I don't see that as self doubt so much as self awareness and self questioning and challenging..."*

For **Coach Simon**, the meetings with his supervisor provide the opportunity to review the way he is working with clients, and possibly get a second opinion. He sees the opportunity to raise his self-awareness as a positive learning experience,

In contrast, **Coach Helen** describes coping with a situation with a difficult client before she was in supervision:

*"I think what he was getting from me... I didn't feel was very helpful, but I persisted. But I think it was the effect it had - how I felt about myself afterwards - is this the sort of job I ought to be doing if I can't handle somebody like that?"*

Working with this particular client raised doubts about her capability in **Coach Helen's** mind.

She continues:

*"It was a generalising feeling that it tipped over into other things."*

Just as clients have described the experience of doubt in one area extending into others, so **Coach Helen's** experience with one client appeared to spread beyond the specific incident.

She describes her reluctance to discuss it:

*“There was just one person I mentioned it to in passing but I didn’t like that very much. But I didn’t talk in depth about it to anybody because I didn’t want to lose my credibility totally really, and I didn’t want it to filter back.”*

**Coach Helen** saw the difficulties of raising the issue with others, as she felt it might affect her professional standing. This reflects the situation clients experience at work, where expressing doubts about their capability might lessen other people’s confidence in them.

She reflects further on what she has learned since attending the coaching course:

*“I put it to one side. I think that’s how I dealt with it until I came on this course, and then I was able to look at it and think you know, what could I have done? And I think what I could have done was after ten minutes say, I really don’t think I’m the right coach for you.”*

In a way **Coach Helen’s** situation was the opposite of **Coach Simon’s**. **Coach Simon** used his supervision sessions to review how he was working with his clients. It is possible that in doing this, he pre-empted self-doubt. **Coach Helen** did not have the opportunity at that time to discuss the difficult client she was coaching. One might speculate that if she had been in supervision, she would have discussed the client with her supervisor and felt more confident in herself. The powerful approach she could have taken, which was to take control of the situation (*“I really don’t think I’m the right coach for you”*), was a result of her greater understanding from the course.

The strategies used by coaches in coping with self-doubt to an extent mirror those adopted by the clients. They see the value in the supervisory process, because it gives them the opportunity to discuss and review their work with another experienced practitioner. In this way they receive professional support, which may pre-empt feelings of self-doubt about their abilities.

#### ***Summary of the coaches’ strategies to overcome their own self-doubt***

The coaches’ strategies in dealing with self-doubt might be described as proactive, in that the supervisory arrangement might forestall it. Confidentiality and professional credibility might make it important to mask any difficulties from others. In

contrasting the experience of **Coach Helen** with **Coach Simon**, one might speculate that without the safe context of supervision, the coach could be vulnerable to feelings of self-doubt.

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### **Overview of strategies adopted by coaches to overcome self-doubt**

In exploring the strategies used by coaches in overcoming self-doubt, certain themes have emerged:

#### ***A questioning approach***

Challenging the clients' thinking, which may involve questioning their beliefs to identify the facts and the logical course of action, seemed to be beneficial in helping clients' address self-doubt. Using this approach may also help to reveal the underlying issue, rather than the one that is presented.

#### ***Developing the mask***

One of the areas discussed earlier in the Findings, was the hidden nature of self-doubt. The strategy in this respect that seems to have worked for one client is that her coach advised her to mask it. By presenting herself as a confident person, she was able to exercise more influence.

#### ***Objectivity of the coach***

The clients seemed to value the coach as external to the organisation. The objectivity which the coach brought was seen as beneficial, particularly in the area of self-doubt, which was identified as being difficult to address on one's own.

#### ***Relationship between the coach and the client***

A key benefit of coaching in self-doubt for the clients was the relationship between themselves and their coaches. The coaches identified this to an extent, in discussing the warmth they felt for their clients. However, the support and positive affirmation the clients received clearly was an important aspect in addressing their feelings of self-doubt. The coaching session was seen as a safe place, where they could in effect drop the mask, and discuss issues that were troubling them at work.



### ***The importance of supervision***

The coaches' need to mask professional doubts from others is similar to the need clients have to keep their self-doubt hidden at work. However, with coaches there is the additional requirement of client confidentiality, so the meeting with the supervisor is an important space where coaches can discuss their work with clients.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

This final chapter covers the limitations to the study, discusses the findings from the research and the implications for coaching practice in self-doubt. Suggestions for further research in this area are also discussed. I also briefly consider my own learning and development from conducting the study.

### Limitations

This was a small study involving eight participants. Whilst steps were taken to increase reliability and validity, it is not possible to generalise the findings. This would require a larger study with a greater number of participants. Although the research was carried out with the intention of making it replicable, it must be acknowledged that a different researcher with different participants on a different occasion may uncover different results.

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### Discussion of findings

This section discusses the themes emerging from the study in relation to the literature in this field, which was covered in Chapter Two. What appear to be gaps in the literature are also be highlighted.

The themes that I have identified emerged in two ways during analysis of the data. Certain of the themes were quite explicitly stated by the participants, and therefore one may assume were within their level of awareness, although they may have been prompted into consciousness by the interview questions. These themes include self-doubt as work-related, self-doubt as an emotional experience, and self-doubt as a belief. However, it was mainly through analysis of metaphors that the themes of feelings of lack of control and the hidden nature of self-doubt were identified. An entry in my research diary whilst I was analysing the data reads: "Amazed at the power of the metaphors that are emerging. All different, but providing extra insight into the meaning of self-doubt for each person. What is remarkable is the consistency of what they are expressing at a deeper level".

### *Self-doubt as a work-related phenomenon*

The literature on both self-doubt at work and as a subject for coaching is limited, as was explored in the chapter reviewing the literature in this area. Although both Zeus and Skiffington (2000) and Downey (2003) discuss the negative effects self-doubt may have on performance at work, they do not identify it as a work-related phenomenon. Yet one of the findings from the study is that, although people may experience self-doubt differently, they seem to perceive it as work-related. Both the clients and the coaches identify certain work situations as triggers for self-doubt. This seems to be connected to transition in some form: a new role, a change of boss, a new organisational structure. In such situations people may perceive their existing skills and abilities as inadequate to carry out their work effectively in the transition into a new role, and this may affect their performance adversely. To an extent one needs to take account of the context for this study, in that the participants were coaching and being coached, in a work setting, so it is not surprising that they may relate self-doubt to their experience in the workplace. However, the clients were quite explicit about not experiencing self-doubt outside work.

Given that change is such a frequent phenomenon in working life, it is perhaps surprising that the organisational and coaching literature does not focus more on the effect it has on employees, particularly given the potential link between confidence and stress identified by Gyllesten and Palmer (2006). If it is the case that change leads to feelings of inadequacy in employees which may, even if only temporarily, affect their work performance and how they feel about work, then it would make sense for organisations to pay more attention to it.

### *Self-doubt as an emotional experience*

The results of the study seem to suggest that self-doubt is connected to feelings. The effects are mostly described in emotional terms. In line with Pelham's (1991) suggestion linking self-doubt and feelings of self-worth, there is some evidence from the findings that if self-doubt is not addressed, it may adversely affect self-esteem, which is seen as more damaging. Hermann, Leonardelli and Arkin's (2002) experiment showing that if feelings of self-doubt are not alleviated, then self-esteem may suffer, may be reflected, for instance in the experience of **Client Tony** (described

on p. 54). If, as Compte and Postlethwaite (2004) suggest, performance depends on emotions, then once again it would seem appropriate for both organisations and the coaching profession to pay proper attention to this area.

Self-doubt also seems to be linked to feelings of lack of control. This may be because the person does not feel their abilities are up to the job, and therefore feels vulnerable, or that other people they are comparing themselves with seem all powerful and they feel inadequate. This aspect of self-doubt does not appear to be discussed in the literature at all. However, understanding that there may be a link between self-doubt and feelings of lack of control could help in addressing it.

#### ***Self-doubt as a belief***

There is some indication that the participants realise that feelings of self-doubt may be based on perception, not necessarily on reality. An emotion is not necessarily a logical response to a situation, and the facts may be overlooked or ignored. This is well-recognised in the literature; Bandura (1997) for instance, states that people base their actions more on belief than what is objectively true.

It is unclear how self-doubt, which seems to be associated with negative beliefs about oneself, is consistent with Kelly's (1971) attribution theory and the self-serving bias, which suggests that people tend to inflate their capabilities. Blaine and Crocker's (1993) research indicates that self-serving biases are widespread. This is a small study, and one must be cautious about making too many inferences from it, particularly as Kelly, Blaine and Crocker were discussing self-esteem rather than self-doubt. However, the fact that so many popular self-help books are published in this area does indicate a certain inconsistency. It is possible that the self-serving bias does not operate in certain aspects of one's self-evaluation in certain circumstances. It is also possible that people may talk confidently about their abilities (inflating their capabilities) when they are in fact feeling rather more self-critical than they appear. It may be that it is masked in some way; that people are inclined to present a "front".

#### ***Self-doubt as hidden***

It appears that men and women may differ in how open they are prepared to be about discussing self-doubt. It seems that women may be more inclined to raise it earlier

than men, and this may be because of the expectations that society places on the way men behave. However, for both it may need to be teased out, as it may not be actively presented.

Certainly the study suggests that self-doubt is hidden, both in the way it is described by the participants, and in the metaphors they use. From a number of perspectives this is not surprising. For example, Goffman (1959) uses the metaphor of theatrical performance to explore how people present themselves and their activities in social situations. He describes how people attempt to guide and control the impressions others form of them. Revealing that one is experiencing feelings of self-doubt may damage the perception of how one is performing (or feels one ought to perform) in a given role. In such a situation it may be considered best to keep it hidden.

Just as Bachkirova (2004) describes the dissatisfaction caused by the perceived difference between the ideal self and self-image, so certain clients saw a gap between their desired work performance and how they felt they were performing. This led to a perception of being the wrong person for the job. In other words, they were experiencing the kind of feelings described by Brookfield (1995) in discussing the impostor syndrome in teachers.

#### ***The role of the coach in helping clients overcome self-doubt***

The strategies used by coaches to help their clients overcome self-doubt were mainly those they would use in coaching generally. Developing an empathic and supportive relationship with the client was important, as was using questioning to help reveal the underlying issue or to help the client identify their own resources. The coaches drew on a range of approaches, including challenging beliefs and identifying what the evidence was for those beliefs. These were similar to the strategies suggested by Zeus and Skiffington (2000) and Neenan and Palmer (2001).

From the clients' perspective, the objectivity of the coach was important, and they connected this to the fact that they were external to the organisation. Organisations are seen as political places and it may not be safe (or appropriate) to discuss negative emotions such as self-doubt with others. Given that self-doubt has already been identified as hidden, it seems that the time spent with the coach is seen as a safe place

where these deeper aspects of one's emotional experience can be shared. As one client suggested, it may be difficult to address self-doubt on one's own, and a skilled helper may be needed to provide another perspective.

In the context of the dangers of expressing negative emotions at work, it is interesting that one of the clients benefited from her coach's suggestion that she did not admit to self-doubt, but kept it masked. This is at odds with Brookfield's (1995) proposal that it should be named and thus lose its power, and Kets de Vries's (2005) suggestion that a good boss should openly point out that fear of failure is normal. However, one could conceive of a difference between discussing self-doubt as a phenomenon that may be experienced in certain situations, and openly admitting to experiencing it oneself.

How one manages emotion at work is an important area, and it is interesting to note the results from a study by Kramer and Hess (2002) that examines communication rules that govern emotion management in the workplace. It shows that maintaining professionalism is central to appropriate emotion management, and that in particular, the appropriate display of negative emotions typically means masking those emotions. Kramer and Hess suggest that knowing the communication rules for emotion management is important for individuals to understand organisational culture and to ultimately achieve career success:

"Only a few examples provided by the respondents involved what was considered an appropriate display of negative emotion, such as displaying anger at a deserving individual. Most were examples of masking negative emotions, such as people acting calm when they were apparently upset" (p. 76).

In this context, masking self-doubt at work could be considered advisable.

The clients, however, were clear in their perception of where the real benefit of coaching lay for them, and that was in the positive and supportive role of the coach. Given that it seems that self-doubt is connected with feeling, and that it is unsafe to express it at work, it is perhaps not surprising that clients value the emotional support of their coach. Therefore the relationship with the coach in itself appears to help the client feel more positive about their abilities. This is in line with Flaherty's (1999) observation on the key part the relationship plays in coaching. Bachkirova (2004)

also observes that support, encouragement and positive feedback are the most useful means of helping clients overcome self-doubt.

It may be that the importance of the coaching relationship as a means of support is in part due to changes in modern society, as Bachkirova and Cox (2004) indicate. They suggest that the establishment of coaching as a profession is in part attributable to “the current situation in western and westernised societies in which the quality of relationships and particularly helping relationships seem to be constantly decreasing” (p. 3).

### **Implications of the findings for coaching practice**

This is a small study, so one must be tentative in putting forward suggestions for coaching practice from the findings. However, it may be helpful to consider the following points:

#### ***The organisation***

Employees might benefit if organisations were prepared to acknowledge more openly that self-doubt can occur at certain times, and be prepared to do something about it. From an organisational perspective, it would make sense to have coaching available during times of transition. Research suggests that people are more effective when they feel more positive about their capabilities. There is evidence that transition may affect work performance, and as Benabou and Tirole (2002) point out, organisations have a vested interest in shoring up a person’s self-esteem. However, a fine balance may need to be struck between helping the client feel more positive about herself, because it enhances performance, and the greater self-awareness needed for personal growth.

The value clients saw in the coach as external to the organisation may have implications for the use of internal coaches, at least for helping clients manage transition.

#### ***The relationship between coach and client***

As discussed earlier, the relationship between coach and client is always seen as critical to the success of coaching. In this respect coaching clients with issues of self-doubt is no different from coaching in other scenarios. However, the positive

affirmation that the clients experienced from their coaches in situations where they felt negative about their abilities, suggests that in coaching clients with self-doubt it may be particularly valuable for the coach to communicate their empathic understanding and positive support clearly and explicitly. The objectivity of the coach and the experience of a safe environment were also considered important and the coach may need to emphasise that aspect of the coaching relationship.

### ***Control***

This seemed to be an important aspect of feelings of self-doubt, in that in explicit terms, and also in the metaphors used, the clients felt that they lacked control or were powerless in some way. In coaching, it may be possible to explore with the client whether this is a realistic assessment of the situation, or is it based on a belief, in which case it could be challenged. It may also be possible to examine areas where the client has control and discuss options to increase this.

### ***Expressing feelings of self-doubt***

This aspect of self-doubt has implications not only for the creation of a safe space where the client can fully express their feelings of self-doubt, but also in the coaches skill in drawing out what may be underlying issues in this respect. The coach may also need to be aware that men may take longer to express their feelings of self-doubt, and gentle probing may be needed. However, the coach may also need to be sensitive to the dangers of projecting self-doubt on to a client, particularly if it is something they experience themselves.

### ***Keeping self-doubt hidden***

It may be that the coach needs to explore with the client how they express their feelings of self-doubt in the workplace. The consequences of revealing negative emotions could be discussed in the light of how organisations expect employees to behave, and the possible effects on career progression.

### ***Listening to the metaphors that clients use***

The clients used rich metaphors in describing their experience of self-doubt. By listening carefully to the metaphors that clients use, the coach may gain greater insight into the client's felt experience. It may also be possible to help change the clients'



thinking by asking them to use metaphors to reframe their experience in a more positive way.

### ***Coaching supervision***

From the coaches' perspective, it seemed that supervision could help them address their own feeling of self-doubt. To an extent the value of the relationship between coach and supervisor mirrors the value of the relationship between client and coach.

### **A description of self-doubt**

One of the aims of the study was to attempt to describe self-doubt. I considered what I had learned whilst exploring this field, so that any description of self-doubt would reflect the findings. It seemed that self-doubt was work-related, and also an emotional response to a subjective evaluation of one's abilities. Because it is subjective it may not be grounded in reality or true. It may not relate to all aspects of a person's job, just certain aspects of it. Bearing all this in mind I developed the following description of self doubt as:

*Negative feelings associated with evaluating one's abilities as less than are perceived adequate to carry out a piece of work effectively.*

### **Suggestions for further research in self-doubt in the coaching context**

This study has explored the experience of self-doubt in coaching, and strategies for overcoming it. The findings suggest that further research is needed in this area. Clearer evidence of the relationship between self-doubt and performance at work, and the return on investment of organisations employing coaches during periods of transition might increase our understanding of this area. Research into evaluating coaching strategies that help individuals address self-doubt might also yield useful information. Another area of research may be the value of supervision for coaches in managing their own feelings of self-doubt.

### **My own learning and development**

On a professional level, I have learned a great deal from carrying out this study. It has encouraged me to reflect on, and re-think, the way I work with clients. I try to demonstrate empathy more openly. I listen with greater care to the metaphors that my clients use, and encourage them to re-frame. I am more alert to the possibility that

self-doubt may be a problem for a client, and that it may take time to emerge, particularly with male clients. I am also conscious that I may project my own self-doubt on to the client, and have to be mindful of the implications of this. I am more aware that if I am seeing a client who is experiencing change in some form, they may be more likely to be experiencing self-doubt. And I am also more aware of the implications of clients discussing it in the workplace, in the light of their future career.

On a personal level, the study led me to examine further my experiences with the teachers at the school I attended. I reflected on what the teachers themselves may have been experiencing, working in a new grammar school that was very much in the spotlight. Their own anxieties may have driven their behaviour in wanting the school to be successful. Whilst, with a few exceptions, I cannot look back on the teaching staff with any real degree of affection, I do feel now that I can at least regard them with a certain amount of understanding.

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## **Appendix I: Coaches' and clients' interview schedules**

### **Coaches Interview Schedule**

- 1. What do you understand by the term 'self-doubt'?**
- 2. How did you arrive at this understanding?**
- 3. What proportion of your clients experience self-doubt?**
- 4. When is self-doubt experienced?**
- 5. How is it manifested?**
- 6. What models, approaches, tools etc do you use to help the client overcome feelings of self-doubt?**
- 7. Have you a particular approach that you favour over the others?**
- 8. Has your approach to working with clients on self-doubt changed with experience?**
- 9. How do you evaluate the success of your approach?**
- 10. Have you experienced occasions when you felt that the issues raised are outside your expertise?**
- 11. If this has happened to you, how have you handled this sort of situation?**
- 12. Is there anything else that you would like to say on this topic?**

## **Clients Interview Schedule**

Note: the main questions are set out in bold, with prompt/probe questions underneath.

**1. How recently have you been coached?**

**2. Was the coach a man or a woman?**

**3. What do you understand by the term ‘self-doubt’?**

**4. How did you arrive at this understanding?**

Own experience?

Reading?

Discussion with others?

Anything else?

**5. Have there been times when you have doubted yourself?**

**6. How often does this happen?**

**7. How easy/difficult was it to raise the topic of self-doubt with your coach?**

Would it have been easier/more difficult with the other gender?

**8. Have you noticed any particular triggers for self-doubt?**

Situations?

People?

Tasks?

Timing (for instance, starting a new job)?

**9. How do you know when you have experienced self-doubt?**

What form does it take (emotions, physical effects, thoughts)?

What effect does it have?

How long does it last?

**10. Has it affected your performance at work?**

How?

Can you recall specific situations?

**11. When you were being coached, did you discuss your feelings of self-doubt with your coach?**

Was it an issue you specifically wanted to be coached on?

At what stage was it raised as an issue?

Did you raise it yourself?

What prompted you to raise it?

Did your coach raise it?

What prompted your coach to raise it?



**12. Did you experience self-doubt during the coaching process?**

As part of the assessment process (eg 360 feedback)?

From discussions with the coach?

In between coaching sessions – for instance as a result of trying out new behaviours?

Other?

**13. Has the experience of self-doubt had any benefits?**

Greater insight into yourself?

New learning?

Other?

**14. What strategies did your coach adopt to help you overcome feelings of self-doubt?**

**15. What worked for you?**

Why?

**16. What didn't work for you?**

Why?

**17. How quickly did the change occur?**

**18. How do you know if the coaching on self-doubt has been effective?**

Is it a feeling?

Is it changes in behaviour?

Other?

**19. Has it resulted in you doing things differently?**

Can you give specific examples?

**20. Is there anything else that you would like to say on this topic?**

**21. Is there anything else that you would like to ask me?**

## **Appendix II: Preview of themes sent to clients**

**This is to give you an idea of the themes that will be covered during the interview**

How you would describe self-doubt.

Times when you have experienced self-doubt.

Triggers for this experience.

What form it takes.

Its effect on work performance

How it was raised during your coaching sessions.

The strategies your coach used to help you overcome self-doubt and what worked/didn't work for you.

How you may/may not be doing things differently

### Appendix III: Example of interview transcript

Client interview: Anne (30 mins 43 secs)

(Interview questions in **bold**)

**OK. Thanks very much Anne. So can you tell me a little bit about um your background in terms of your career also your sort of experience of of being coached as well.**

Yep. I qualified as a physio in 1994 and I did 2 years, or 18 months to 2 years working in Dover.

**Right.**

Came up to work at xxxxx Hospitals in 96 and joined as a senior physio and then have progressed through the ranks if you like. Um I took took my current role as physio manager in 2004 and that's when I started the MSc in um Health and Social Care Management at Oxford Brookes so my experience of coaching first came then. P was attached to the course and so I had 6 sessions with P over that first year, and then I've decided to continue that myself privately since then as well.

**OK. So have you had experience of of coaching outside um you know as part of your role or is it just experience of being coached.**

Er as part of the coaching process I had to um have somebody here that I did 6 sessions with to coach as well um and I think coaching mentoring is very interchangeable within physiotherapy, um and we would do far more sort of clinical mentoring as as we would see it but probably not the personal coaching side that that I certainly do with P for myself.

**Yes OK. Fine. That's really helpful. Thanks for that in terms of background. So I was going to ask....my first question was how recently have you you have you been coached but in fact it was this morning. (Laughs.)**

This morning! Yes.

**And we know that it's um that it's a woman because we both know know P, um so um the gender I won't ask about gender at the moment. But um just going into this whole area of self-doubt, what what do you understand the term to mean. What does it mean to you?**

To me it means um having doubt in myself to um (pause) whether that be personal or professional so I think um confidence I think is something that it means to me. It's that lack of confidence and um sort of being able to stand by your decisions and and and feeling that you made the right ones.

**Mmm. Yea. OK. So it it sounds as if there's two domains there for you, one is personal and one is work, professional if you like.**

Yes.

**Um so you you feel there's some self-doubt in both those domains?**

I don't. I feel um personally I think um I don't really suffer from self-doubt (laughs). I'm quite comfortable and confident in in what I do outside of work. I think that the times that I've experienced self-doubt within within a professional capacity range massively from clinical treatments um with the patients and clinical reasoning and making the right um treatment paths for those patients but also as a manager about um managing well and knowing that I can do the job. So where I started two years ago I think I experienced lots of confidence issues um ur about my ability to do it um but I don't experience that now.

**OK. I'd like to come back to that but I um I just want to sort of um the term selfdoubt, your understanding of what it means to you. How did you arrive at this understanding? What any was it your experience, or by reading about it, or....**

No I haven't read about it at all. I think the other thing that affects my um experience of it is probably my personal relationship with my husband, suffered from depression last year and had counselling and I've had some counselling as well um and I spent some time and he spent some time in psychiatric clinics so I think my understanding of it is is that's the background to it.

**Right OK. Well thank you for that. So it it's your experience basically.**

Yes

**Um so in terms of doubting yourself it's in the work situation?**

Yes.

**And it's got....one is sort of actually hands on with with patients um and the other is managing.**

Yes.

**And is your how is your role split now?**

Er well one of my issues with self-doubt at the moment is that I haven't done any clinical work for nearly a year. So I'm about to start back into um doing some clinical work which will be out of a 36 hour week it should be approximately 10 hours a week of clinical work.

**Right.**

So my anxiety if you like is is now is about returning to you know um my skills are rusty, (laughs) my clinical skills are rusty and I know that they are so it's about managing that as I come back into it again.

**Right. Because it's another new, it's it's almost like a new situation.**

Yes.

**I mean it's not brand new but....**

No. But it... I'm anxious because it hasn't I haven't done it for a year. And although you don't forget your basic physiotherapy skills generally (laughs) I hope not.... Um that you actually um that your clinical reasoning and your decision-making with the patient is right for them obviously because you want to do the best for them for the recovery.

**Yes that's right yea. Um generally speaking how often do you experience self-doubt? You mentioned specifics, you mentioned the current situation with going....you know picking up the physio work again, the clinical work, and you mentioned when you were first a manager, um very specific instances. What about other occasions does it, do other occasions trigger feelings of self-doubt?**

I think there are um instances for me for example um working with a group of people at senior management level higher than myself that I actually um doubt at times that I have anything um to offer um and it's being comfortable with that, so that's one example. Other ones are um personal issues with staff members, um and I've talked through that a lot with P this morning as well, er as to how I deal with that, um and big things um, we had a disciplinary hearing last year, I've got another one in in 4 weeks time, you know one of my members of staff has had an issue at work that has required me to you know um report it to Human Resources and decide to take and to take (stumbles) the decision to take it to disciplinary through disciplinary process. So it's the big for me it's big incidents that triggers in that way.

**And some of these I guess are new to you.**

Yes. It's lack of experience that triggers it. It's a trigger definitely.

**Right. So lack of experience generally. And although you've got experience as a clinical um physiotherapist um what you're saying is that because you haven't done it for a little while it's it's relatively it seems like new again.**

...new again.

**Yea OK. Um how easy or difficult was it to raise the topic of self-doubt with with P, with your coach?**

I have found it very easy, and I think that's partly to do with when I started the MSc and first met P I had just started a new job so lots of things were very new. Um and the thing I value with P is my time. It's time for me, and actually we talk about me, which is something that your not used to doing I think you give, I give a lot of myself personally to work and to home and all the other issues, and um that's where I found um really helpful and beneficial to do it.

**Yes yes OK. Um so no real...Did you feel comfortable raising that fairly early on in your relationship then?**

Yes.

**..with P. Um we've talked about triggers for self-doubt, you mentioned you know whether it's um a new situation or lack of experience particularly, so is it situa...um you've mentioned situations. What about people or tasks? I I guess in a way you've covered this as well, but if you just sort of.....**

People I.....I'm quite reserved, I, if I'm in a in a new group of people whether that be socially or at work, um I like to take a little seat back and and suss people out a little bit. Um and I think my my confidence I've I've always been shy as a as a teenager, found it really hard work, um so loud um extravert type people I will always shy away from and even now I know I do. Um so I think that's that's the way I am in some ways.

**So certain people can also trigger feelings of self-doubt, and we've talked about situations, and tasks, I guess is that what you were talking about in relation to going back to more of the hands-on work?**

Yes.

**OK. And timing, and starting a new job, we've talked a little bit about that as well. Um when you experience self-doubt, what form does it take? How how do you realise that this is a bit of an issue at that moment in time?**

The anxiety that I feel (laughs) which to me is um well anxiety affects me er at ti... sleep is affected....

**So you will lose some sleep?**

I will lose some sleep, um definitely, I will be thinking about the situation or the experience either that I have just had or I am coming up to, so I will be um thinking about that on the drive to and from work. Um I will be discussing it more with my husband at home. Um and er feelings of sorry, nervousness, so (pause) butterflies in your stomach, that kind of thing.

**So it has er a physical effect?**

It has a physical effect, yes.

**Um and it has it preoccupies your thoughts to an extent.**

Yes.

**What about on an emotional level? Do you feel any (pause) change in emotion?**

I don't think so. I think because um certainly the last 18 months has taught me that actually you need to talk about things, that you can't keep things bottled up, so I am

much, er, within my support network, I am happy, happier now to discuss things probably more than pre 18 month.

**OK. So you've learned to talk things through and do you find that helpful?**

I do find that helpful.

**So before that did you tend to keep things to yourself rather...?**

Yes, and it's something that we've talked, that P and I have talked about. It's about presenting the front um and feeling that I had to cope with it, and actually I don't because I mean it doesn't make any difference whether I say I can cope or not, things still happen. (Laughs.)

**(Laughs.) True.**

**Does that mean you feel more emotionally in control now you can talk about it?**

Yes I feel I look after myself better.

**So talking about it makes you feel more ...**

It means that I share it so I'm not trying to process it on my own and that other people around me will understand things that I'm going through perhaps.

**So you have particular colleagues, apart from P, you have colleagues you share things with here?**

Yes my boss E and particularly the deputy manager at xxxxxx Hospital I do have a good senior support network here and the other thing is that us being physiotherapist you're part of a union and we have two stewards I actually share a fair bit with them as well we have employee discussions if there are situations like disciplinary where we will have informal discussions around that anyway but in a supportive way for both of us.

**So would you say you're mentored internally apart from your coaching or is not that formal?**

I do, it's not that formal I do have a link mentor who is Assistant Director of Organisational Development and time is a bit of an issue within work and that's for everybody it doesn't matter who you are and that's why I still like the link with P because it makes my stop go outside she doesn't have anything to do with work in our conversation which I think is important.

**Yes, it's another view point. When you're experiencing self doubt has it affected your performance at work at all?**

I would say yes it probably has in respect of for example if I went for a meeting with the Directors I feel that at times I don't actually get my point across or the point of

view for physiotherapist services so I feel that that would effect decision making at a higher level, so yes I would say so.

**You've talked generally can you think of a specific examples where it's happened?**

Not of the top of my head.

**It's OK. So you're saying in discussions with senior management and that's a trigger for self doubt anyway isn't it?**

Yes.

**Has it got easier as you've been longer in the role so it's less of an issue than it was?**

Yes. Less of an issue than it was and that I've had to work hard on that so we would have normally we would have management away days, two days away at a conference centre and we'd stay over night, I used to absolutely hate it and it would be about the small talk with people that I didn't know, it would be about dealing with strong characters within the groups that I'd be working in and it would be for me about actually getting my point of view across as well but certainly again it's something that I've discussed with P and I've got some strategies for actually going in there and trying to cope with that a little bit better but also since I've been in the post for two years my exposure within the trust so my network has grown managers that I know from the things that I've dealt with individually has increased so I know more people and that's been really important.

**So things are more familiar, the people are more familiar?**

Yes.

**Your coaching with P is ongoing and you said you raised it fairly early on because there was a lot going on and has been going on when you raised it was it a particular issue you wanted to be coached on?**

I can't remember because it was two years ago.

**Fair enough. And you raised it fairly early on so we know it was in quite an early stage and you raised it yourself by the sound of it or it was something she spotted it you decided you wanted to talk about?**

Yes.

**You said you've been much more open in the last eighteen months I guess that's linked in somehow possibly with your meetings with P?**

Yes I'm sure it is.

**So that whole process made you feel more comfortable about being open?**



Yes definitely.

**It was because there was such a lot going on at that time that you decided to bring it up would that be fair?**

Yes I'm sure there was the MSC and the new post was a massive change in my life, the way I came into the new post was a concern for me as well. I was the deputy manager at xxxxx Hospital the my manager there at the time, the acting manager here both applied for the position and didn't get it so I was appointed above the choice of the manager at xxxxx who then left and above the acting manager here who then had to slip back down into the deputy manager role here so there was lots of it was extremely difficult time for me, moving over here and then having D the deputy manager here slipping back in underneath me and trying to deal with his issues around the interview process and the selection process for that and also his wife works here and his father also works in the department as well. So to be honest that's probably the first thing I raised with P was to how I dealt with that at the time.

**Quite a difficult situation, I can't think of anything more difficult really.**

Yes so it wasn't an ideal start.

**So what about during the coaching process I mean sometimes people I mean it may not be your experience but I'll flag it up anyway. Sometimes the coaching process itself can trigger feelings of self doubt for instance sometimes people have a 360 degree assessment as part of the process, just giving an illustration sometimes that discussion can raise issues or feelings of self doubt because of the feedback that's given. I mean it doesn't sound as though you've had anything like that?**

No I did some 360 feedback last year around November time just on, something I decided to do, P hadn't encouraged me to do it but I took the results of that to a session with P and lots of people said to me 'your very brave to do that' to do the 360 feedback and it was only on my I had only asked what my personal strengths and weaknesses and my professional strengths and weaknesses and coaching has given me the opportunity to analyse that with P then. So coaching has definitely helped me to be more reflective about my own capabilities and experiences really and I can feel nothing but positive about the whole process.

**It was a brave thing to do.**

But I don't think I would have done it if I hadn't had a coaching relationship to help me through that because whatever way you look at it you always, well I look at it, look at that box oh what have they said.

**Were there any surprises in it for you?**

No.

**So you're pretty self aware?**

Yes.

**So that process did it trigger any further feelings of self doubt or not?**

No I don't think so, I think there were lots and lots of positive things that were said that from it as well that I took away far more and I've been trying to work on some of the constructive points from the other side of it as well and I've done some more work on that since.

**So a useful process.**

Yes a useful thing to do.

**What about in between coaching session if you were trying out new behaviours I guess some of that when you're P I guess you have discussions about doing things differently, practicing those behaviours has that ever triggered any feelings of self doubt?**

Yes when they don't work, I think oh what did I do is there something I could have done better, differently and then its difficult if you're not seeing P for two months to actually have that support and feedback from that but I think physiotherapists in general are quite reflective that's how we reflect on our practice so certainly the way I've been trained has helped me with reflecting on instance and experiences and trying things and then thinking actually no it may not just have been the right environment or the right time or the way I delivered it, whatever it may be.

**So you don't necessarily say oh that behaviours not going to work there might be a number of reasons why it didn't?**

Yes and then I'd go back next time and talk to P if it's been a real problem I'd talk to P and work through it and talk to P again about how to get round that and try something else.

**So your training as a physiotherapist included reflective practice, that's interesting, to have that is a huge advantage?**

Yes.

**Do you think there's any benefits to experiencing self doubt, is there any positives?**

I think so because well I think some level of anxiety if you're going into new situations is a good thing it heightens your awareness and your alertness and it doesn't make me blasé about things. I think that certainly having experienced it and then you go to a situation and its actually fine that then helps me to build on for the future to actually say OK that was OK that went well and these were the good things and perhaps next time I can do this. So I think yes it sometimes it is helpful because it helps you change and grow and hopefully be a better manager and person.

**So new insights is what you're saying?**

Yes.

**When you had your sessions with P what strategies did she adopt to help you overcome feelings of self doubt?**

I think she points out a huge amount of positive things so its positive reinforcement and building self esteem I think is how I see it she also helps me to think logically through so what's the evidence for that for feeling like that you know how do you feel about how you handled it and actually helps me not to be negative about experiences and brings out the positive pretty much in everything that I do and take to her.

**So from what you were saying earlier a tendency to focus on the negative anyway so she's putting that into a bit more context and saying where's the evidence for that because sometimes its ? just I'm not saying it's not important but its sort of thinking through logically?**

Yes trying to give it some balance and that happened with the 360 degree feedback as well there was I think one comment there were eighty five positive things there was one comment that was quite bugging me really and she just kind of said you know perhaps that person on that day wasn't feeling that great and you just asked for another report to be done or something like that you have to put it into context and she helps me to do that definitely.

**So in terms of strategies I was going to ask what worked for you but it seems to be the main one she uses is to do with emphasising the positives and it sounds as though you've found that ...**

I've found that very useful, very useful I think as I've said it's about having time for me and focusing on what the good things are that I do. We certainly spent a session doing what have been my achievements in the last year, out of that period of change since I first started my role you know and actually going through and talking about those achievements and why they feel like achievements.

**Are you able to do that more for yourself now I mean we've talked about how challenging your thinking in terms of the negatives and being positives have you learnt to do that for yourself?**

Yes definitely, one of those examples I can give is we have a senior physio here who came in and handing in her notice because she actually wanted to leave work and leave her husband at the same time and she hadn't told him and I spent a lot of time last week and the week before actually working through with her the different work options to actually give her a different alternative to the route that she was taking from a work perspective and I think one of the things that has really helped me to come out of that is that when I look back on that situation I actually am really pleased with the way I dealt with it. I didn't get involved with her in her personal side of the issue my primary concern was removing some of work barriers for her to then be able to make a decision in her personal life and in fact she's going to take some unpaid leave. So I've managed to retain a member of staff who's a key asset to the team and

given her an opportunity to a different window for managing the problem as opposed to leaving everything in her life at the same time.

**A very effective piece of coaching then?**

Yes absolutely and just looking back I can see the positives in that I was talking to P about it this morning and some of the negatives that I still struggle with are taking on her emotional feelings and you know I have struggled with that in the last two weeks but overall I am really pleased with how I've done that.

**So you feel sort of empathy?**

Absolutely.

**But needed to put that to one side?**

Yes.

**I guess there's advantages around feeling that sort of a degree empathy as well but it's from what you're saying not letting it get in the way of sorting out?**

And not taking her feelings on board internalising them to myself and giving her other opportunities.

**Is there anything in these strategies that P's used that didn't work for you anything she's suggested that didn't work?**

Not that I can think of I mean we used specific incidents or problems that I have at the time and everything that we've talked about just helps me come to a decision at the end whether I'm going to try the things that she's suggested as well or she's helped me to come to a decision on a different route. I don't think there's anything that I've kind of walked away with and just thought that hasn't worked or doesn't work for me.

**How quickly did change start to happen after, I mean I know its two years ago since you first saw her after you first raised the issue and you started having coaching how quickly can you remember did the effect the benefits start to?**

I've always felt benefit from coaching from early on I know for me it gets better as my relationship with P has progressed as well or building that relationship but I certainly felt benefit even from the first session that I had with her of being able to take things away and go and work on them and come back and revisiting the situations and things like that. So very early on.

**I was going to ask you how you know if the coaching on self doubt has been effective but I've think we've handled that a little bit. So from what you're saying its not it effects how you're feeling I guess can you describe any of those feelings?**

In terms of how I feel now?

**Yes because it sounds as though self doubt is your managing it more effectively let's say so how does that make you feel?**

I'm very positive it makes me feel that I do a good job and it makes me feel comfortable within the role that I do at work and that I do more than a good job actually you can tell I've been with P, I'm wonderful. It makes me be able to deal with situations that perhaps in the past I would have shied away from so another example of something that I've just had to do today. We interviewed for a new physiotherapists this week and we've got two working in the department as an assistant and they've worked for us previously and I just had to tell them they didn't get the jobs. Now I probably would have dwelled on that long and hard two years ago about how I would go about doing it but actually today of course I've thought about it in the car and how they're going to be and all that kind of thing but it hasn't completely consumed my thoughts so I've come in, don't it at lunch time people's reactions always continue to surprise me sometimes.

**So it wasn't quite what you were expecting or ...**

Well we did have tears from both of them but I really expected that but actually both of them also said that they didn't feel that they did as well in the interview as they would have liked to and they both felt that they didn't perform well enough to actually have been offered the jobs so from their reflections as physiotherapists I think they reflected on their interviews as well and actually felt that they didn't answer the questions in such a good way.

**So what you're saying it sounds like it's been changes in behaviour as well from the feeling that from the self doubt being more managed, you're actually doing things you wouldn't have done before?**

Yes.

**So maybe taking on other things and also handling things differently?**

Yes.

**That's all I have to say in terms of the general questions I'm covering. Is there anything else you want to say in this area, this topic?**

I just find coaching invaluable really and I particularly feel for me it needs to be somebody outside the organisation and that's because P gives me an objective view point, she also doesn't know me personally something else she makes it very objective she doesn't know necessary about physiotherapist profession and I find it really useful to get an objective view point on it and she I think she balances me quite a lot.

**So quite different from the sort of informal mentoring by the sound of it that you get internally which is much more to do with work its more do with you?**

Yes and she's very clear on that when we have our sessions that whatever incidence or things that I want to discuss that are work based she still brings it back to and how does it make you feel, this is about you and what are you pleased with or not pleased with and what are your feelings about that.

**Anything else you'd like to ask me?**

How many people are you doing this with?

**Eight. Is there anything else you want to talk about in terms of the.....**

No.

**That's lovely thank you very much indeed.**

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Appendix IV: Example of data analysis**

### **Client Tony: themes with line references (extract)**

#### **Relationship with C**

Client-caring (if a coach is client-caring then s/he will be client-centred)  
Disconnected from work environment (164)  
A positive look at his career (357-358)  
Reflection on past achievements (362-363, 371-374)  
Coaching style (427-430)  
Validated by C (486-490)  
Much more alive (537)  
Getting up and getting things done. (545-550)

#### **Defintion of self-doubt**

A mindset (59)  
A slippery slope – possibly into depression (589-596)

#### **Triggers for it**

Get it yourself or pushed into it (59-60)  
Not good enough (61-62)  
Confidence is eroded (60)  
Demeaning boss (99-110)  
External validation (115-122)  
Comfort zone in new role (182-186)  
Not phased by new role – enjoys it (196-197)  
Problem of over-analysis (85-87, 142, 235-236)  
Wanting change (311-312)  
Lack of recognition (634-635)  
Culture of negativism sucking you in (651-652)

#### **Metaphors**

Arranging pencils (putting things off, but also making thing right before you begin)  
Thinking things through to point it's a tragedy (84)  
I'll analyse it to death (86)  
He gradually beat us down (104-105)  
You carry it with you – its inside you (120-121)  
Small things become big things (a recurring theme) (82-83, 93-94, 128-129)  
Analysis paralysis (233-234)  
Slightly withdrawn (248)  
Moving back into your shell (248)  
Slippery slope (592) (lack of control??)

### **Identified themes from clients (extract)**

#### **Relationship with coach**

Client-focused (T)  
Disconnected from work (T)  
Positive look at his career (T)  
Reflection on past achievements (T)  
Not to be negative (A)  
Evidence for feelings (A)  
Having time for Self (A)  
Focusing on good things she does (A)  
Talking about achievements (A)  
Working through problems (A)  
Having space to say how she feels (Ang)  
Being able to share and dump (Ang)  
Not share with colleagues (Ang)  
Open to suggestions (Ang)

#### **Definition of s/d**

A mindset (T)  
A slippery slope (T) (continuum)  
Concern doesn't have skills (G)  
Exposed (G)  
Work (G)  
Standards (G)  
Gap btw where is and wants to be (G)  
Lack of confidence (A)  
Decision-making (A)  
Not personal life (A)  
Professional (A)  
Ability as manager (A)  
Believing you don't have what it takes (Ang)  
I can't do this (Ang)  
Point at which s/d flips into low s/e (Ang)

#### **Effect on performance**

Not getting point across (A)  
Effect on decision-making (A)  
Keeping her in wrong place (Ang)  
Impact on how others see her (Ang)  
Waste time (Ang)  
Procrastinate (Ang)  
Not at full throttle (Ang)  
Not as upbeat (Ang)  
Takes toll on her rather than perf (Ang)  
Couldn't do job well with s/d (Ang)  
Shares experiences more (Ang)

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## Appendix V: Ethics review checklist

**Form EE1**  
**Oxford Brookes University**  
**Westminster Institute of Education**

### Ethics Review Checklist

This checklist should be completed by any student or staff member undertaking a research project involving human participants. The checklist will identify whether an application for ethics approval needs to be submitted to the School Research Ethics Officer or considered at one of the school research committees.

Before completing this form, please refer to the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines and the University Code of Practice on Ethical Standards for Research involving Human Participants.

Please note researchers, and where relevant their supervisors, are responsible for exercising appropriate professional judgement in completing this checklist and following ethical guidelines.

#### Part One

	YES	NO
1. Could the research induce psychological stress or anxiety, cause harm or have negative consequences for the participants (beyond the risks encountered in their normal lifestyles)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2. Will deception of participants be necessary during the study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3. Will the study involve prolonged or repetitive testing?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
4. Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses or compensation for time) be offered to participants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
5. Are there any difficulties with obtaining permission to involve children under sixteen from the school or parents?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
6. Are there problems with the participants' right to remain anonymous or to have the information they give be not identifiable as theirs?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
7. Is the right to withdraw from the study at any time withheld or not made explicit?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
8. Does the study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable (e.g. people with learning difficulties or emotional problems, people with difficulty with understanding and/or communication)?		

If you have answered NO to all of questions 1-8 you do not need to apply for ethics approval, though you should keep a copy of this checklist, and you are reminded of your responsibility to maintain vigilance regarding ethics. When any doubt arises about any aspect of the ethics of your study you should apply for ethics approval.

## Appendix VI: Consent form and information sheet

### CONSENT FORM

#### Title of research project:

**An exploration of people's experience of self-doubt in the coaching context, and the strategies adopted by coaches to overcome it.**

**Researcher: Lynne Hindmarch, M.A. student at Oxford Brookes University**

#### Please Initial Box

- |    |  |                          |
|----|--|--------------------------|
| 1. | I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. | I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. | I agree to take part in the above study.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. | I agree to the interview being audio recorded  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. | I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications  | <input type="checkbox"/> |

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Name of Participant

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Date

---

Signature

---

Name of Researcher

---

Date

---

Signature

## **Research Participation Information Sheet for Coaches**

You have been invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

### **Study Title**

An exploration of people's experience of self-doubt in the coaching context, and the strategies adopted by coaches to overcome it.

The study therefore falls into two parts. The first part involves exploring the experience of people who have been coached; the second part focuses on the experience of coaches.

You have been asked to take part in the second part of the study.

### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The reason for undertaking the research is that a significant proportion of my coaching clients raise issues of self-doubt during our meetings, and I suspect this may be the experience of other coaches as well. Although this area seems to be important to clients, little seems to have been written on the topic in the coaching literature. This may suggest that the experience of self-doubt and its meaning to the client needs to be more fully understood.

### **Why have you been chosen?**

I have asked you to take part in this study as I understand that you have coached people who have raised issues of self-doubt during your meetings.

### **What is your commitment?**

Participation in the research is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part, this information sheet is yours to keep, and you will also be asked to sign the consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without having to give a reason.

### **What will happen during the research study?**

If you decide to take part I will be interviewing you about your experience of coaching clients who have expressed self-doubt. The interview will be 'semi-structured'. This means that I have prepared questions I will be asking you, but I may ask supplementary questions depending on what your responses are. The interview will be audio taped and I will be producing a full transcript of the conversation. After the interview I will send you a summary to check for accuracy. As part of the study, all the interviews will be analysed and possible interpretations will be explored.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Although this is a small study, your contribution could help coaches to develop a better understanding of how clients experience self-doubt, and what approaches may help overcome it. This may benefit you personally, and may also benefit other people who want to address self-doubt during the coaching process.

**What about confidentiality and anonymity?**

Security of the material is a prime consideration. The data will be stored on my computer and will not be accessible to other people. You will not be named in the research. In presenting the findings, I intend to refer to participants by pseudonyms. A third party may transcribe the recorded interview, but the only name he or she will have is your pseudonym.

Data generated during the course of the study will be retained in accordance with the University's Policy on Academic Integrity. This means that data must be kept securely in paper or electronic form for a period of five years after completion of the research project.

**Who is organising the research?**

I am conducting the research as a student at the Westminster Institute of Education, Oxford Brookes University, and the results will be used in my dissertation for the M.A. degree in Coaching and Mentoring Practice. My research supervisor at the University is Dr. Tatiana Bachkirova.

The University Research Ethics Committee at Oxford Brookes University has approved the research.

The research is conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society's Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

A bound copy of the dissertation will be kept in the university library and staff and students will be able to access it.

\*\*\*\*\*

If you have any concerns about the way this study is conducted, you can contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on: [ethics@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@brookes.ac.uk).

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. If you would like further information my contact details are below:

Lynne Hindmarch  
[lhindmarch@obc.org.uk](mailto:lhindmarch@obc.org.uk)  
Mo. 07977 12995

## **Appendix VII: Example of interview summary**

### **Summary of main points of interview with Client Anne.**

You described self-doubt as lack of confidence, in either your personal or professional life.

You said that you don't experience self-doubt on a personal level, but you have in a professional capacity. This has been both in your clinical work, and also as a manager. More specifically, you mentioned starting as a new manager 2 years ago, when you experienced a number of confidence issues about your ability that you don't experience now. However, you are just about to start clinical work again after a gap of a year, and you said that your skills were rusty and therefore you were anxious about returning to this area.

You said your understanding of self-doubt has been influenced by your husband's illness last year.

You mentioned other triggers for self-doubt. These are working with a group of people at senior management level, and doubting that you had anything to offer. You mentioned extraverted people as being more difficult to work with. Others triggers are personal issues with staff members, and big things like disciplinary hearings. You said that basically it is lack of experience that acts as a trigger.

You said that you found it easy to talk about self-doubt with P, as when you first saw her you were just starting a new job. You particularly value the time you have with P to talk about yourself.

You said that self-doubt leads to anxiety, and means that you may lose sleep, and that you will spend a lot of time thinking about the situation or experience that is causing it. You described a feeling of butterflies in the stomach and nervousness.

You didn't feel any change at an emotional level, and said that the last 18 months had taught you the importance of discussing things with other people, rather than bottling them up. This means that other people can understand what you are going through. Apart from P, you have a small group of colleagues that you share things with, and also a mentor, although it can be difficult to meet up because of time.

You said that self-doubt has affected your performance at work, because you sometimes didn't feel you got your point across at meetings. You have worked hard of self-doubt, and it is less of an issue than it was. You mentioned specifically the management Away Days, and now having some strategies for coping with them. You have also got to know more people, and this has helped.

You described the early days as manager and the circumstances of your appointment, and how you took the results of the 360 to your coaching sessions with P. You were working on some of the constructive points from the 360, and a lot of positive things were said as well. You said that coaching had helped you be more reflective about your capabilities and experiences, and you felt very positive about the whole process.

You said that between sessions you sometimes experience self-doubt when you are trying a new behaviour and it doesn't seem to work. Reflecting on it, however, has helped you realise that it may have just been the wrong environment or wrong time. If it's a real problem you discuss it with P when you next meet and work it through and discuss trying something else.

Regarding any benefits from self-doubt, you felt that some level of anxiety when going into a new situation is a good thing as it heightens your awareness and stops you being blasé about things. You said that some self-doubt helps you change and grow and hopefully become a better manager and person.

P has used positive reinforcement in building your self-esteem, and also helps you think things through logically and take a different perspective on a situation. You mentioned specifically the session you spent with P focussing on your achievements in the last year.

You said that learning to see things from another perspective means that you are now better able to help others work through alternatives. You mentioned specifically coaching a member of your team who wanted to resign, and talking through the options with her so she eventually took unpaid leave. This gave her an alternative way of managing her problem, and also meant that you retained a member of staff. You said that you felt yourself identifying with her emotionally, but managed to put that to one side.

You said that talking with P helped you reach decisions – whether from something she suggested or by a different route. You didn't feel that anything she suggested hadn't worked.

You said that you felt the benefit from coaching early on and it just gets better as your relationship with P progresses.

Now that you are managing your self-doubt more effectively, you described feeling very positive, that you do a good job, that you will now deal with situations that you may have shied away from before.

You said that you find coaching invaluable, and how important it is for you that the coach is outside the organisation. P gives you an objective viewpoint, and helps balance you. You particularly mentioned that whatever you are discussing, P always brings it back to how you feel - emphasising your feelings.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Appendix VIII: Key findings sent to participants for comment**

The key findings I have identified are outlined below. This is a brief overview of the findings from the research, which will be explored in more detail in the research paper:

### **Defining self-doubt**

In defining self-doubt, coaches were drawing on their own experience as people, but also what they had observed in others in their coaching practice. The client group were describing their own personal experience. Most participants tended to describe it rather than define it.

Coaches saw it as meaning different things to different people. It was described most often as part of a continuum, ranging from lack of confidence at one end, to loss of self-esteem at the other, with self-doubt somewhere in the middle. In this respect it was possible for people to move along the continuum at different times. In terms of the continuum, issues around confidence were seen as less 'deep' than issues of self-esteem. Self-doubt was also seen as connected to the need for external validation (fulfilling job description and competencies) and internal validation (performing to one's own satisfaction). One coach described it as a syndrome. Coaches would not necessarily use the term self-doubt in working with their clients, tending to use the clients' own language.

Clients mostly described it as concern over skills and abilities, in terms of a perceived gap between where they were and where they wanted to be. It was related to feeling exposed, and a belief that one hasn't 'got what it takes'.

Both groups saw self-doubt as mainly related to work.

### **Triggers for self-doubt**

This area explored what the group saw as the main causes of self-doubt. The coaches felt that it was a common issue for their clients, but quite often it is hidden. Some clients (the coaches felt mainly women) presented self-doubt as an issue early on in the coaching relationship. Others (mainly men) were less likely to raise it until later in the relationship (if at all).

Coaches saw triggers to self-doubt as person-specific. However, they identified change and key transitions as being major influences in creating self-doubt in their clients. A new job, a new boss, retirement, a new structure at work, redundancy, were all seen as triggers for self-doubt. Difficulties in relationships at work were also seen as a trigger. Lack of clarity was also an issue – unclear expectations or uncertainty. Comparing oneself with others in an unfavourable way was also a trigger.

Clients' experience of self-doubt reflected the coaches' identified triggers. What they were describing was to an extent historical – some had overcome their self-doubt in the areas they depicted.

They described feeling self-doubt in each new situation – overcoming it in one area didn't stop self-doubt occurring again in a different situation. They also described

feeling that they weren't good enough, like an imposter. Perceiving themselves as lacking knowledge could lead to self-doubt. Over-analysis was also described as a trigger, as was a negative culture (or a demeaning boss). Working with senior people or new people could also lead to feelings of self-doubt. Not having peers was an issue, as was a brand new position with no experienced line manager to give a lead. There was a strong desire to add value, but perceiving themselves as too inexperienced to do that.

### **The effects of self-doubt**

Coaches saw self-doubt as having a physical effect on clients. This included palpitations, anxiety attacks, sweating, feeling sick. These physical effects may be re-enacted by clients when they were asked by their coach to describe the situation that was troubling them.

They saw clients' emotions possibly affecting their thinking, and also a reluctance at times for clients (more frequently amongst men) to recognise and deal with their emotional responses.

Clients experienced the physical effects of self-doubt as disturbed sleep, tiredness, nervousness (butterflies), over-eating, wanting to stay in bed. Becoming tearful and feeling low were also effects. Self-doubt could also result in over-analysis, and getting things out of proportion. It could also lead to paying attention to small issues rather than the major ones. Over-preparation was another effect of self-doubt. Negative self-talk was also an outcome, and feeling that they were the wrong person for the job, and thus being overly humble. Not trusting one's judgement was also identified as an outcome.

Both coaches and clients saw it having a negative effect on performance at work – or at least on perceived performance. Coaches saw clients' potentially facing burn-out, or staying in the comfort zone because their self-doubt held them back. Clients experienced it as affecting decision-making, resulting in procrastination, not working to maximum capacity, reluctance to take risks. It was also described as affecting other people's perception of the person's effectiveness. One client described it as taking a toll on her rather than on her performance, as she struggled to do a good job in the face of feelings of inadequacy.

However, both coaches and clients did not see self-doubt as necessarily a negative experience. It may help people question and think about themselves, building for future growth and development. Self-doubt coupled with self-awareness was seen as beneficial, acting as a trigger for self-improvement. One client described it as 'apprehension' rather than self-doubt, motivating him to prepare more.

### **Coaches' experience of self-doubt**

The four coaches were also asked about their experience of self-doubt as coaches. Self-doubt seems to have been a common experience in the early days of coaching (a need to perform), although this lessened over time. Being challenged or disregarded by the client was seen as a trigger for self-doubt, as was lack of respect from the client. Another trigger was coping with clients' expectations. One coach didn't feel that coaching itself led to self-doubt, but that the associated areas (promoting and



marketing herself for instance) caused self-doubt because she did not see herself as qualified to do it.

Being in supervision was seen as helpful in this respect. The relationship with the supervisor, who was there to offer another opinion, to raise self-awareness and question, but also to provide support and guidance, was seen as important in helping the coach deal with issues of self-doubt.

#### **Coaching strategies used to help clients overcome self-doubt**

All the coaches described their approach as being client-centred. They cared about their clients. None of them used a prescriptive approach to coaching clients, tailoring the process to the needs of the individual. They all had a wide range of models, theories and approaches to draw on. It appears, however, that over time the coaches felt less need to focus on skills or tools. They described this as learning to trust their intuition more, and just being themselves.

From the clients' perspective, in discussing the strategies used by their coaches, the main theme that emerged was their relationship with the coach. They all spoke of their coaches with great warmth and respect. They saw the benefit of the coach being a person from outside work, and therefore able to bring an objective viewpoint. They felt the benefit from coaching in practical ways (for instance being able to discuss options and strategies to deal with particular people and situations). They also saw coaching as a safe place where they were able to spend time talking about, and focusing on, themselves, and issues that were difficult to share at work. They felt supported and affirmed by the coach as people; that the coach saw them in a positive light and believed in them. The coach was also seen as a perceptive person, who knew the client and was able to identify issues that were not immediately obvious and bring them into the client's awareness. Questioning was seen as a powerful tool in that respect. However, it seemed that an important element in the coaching, (perhaps **the** most important), was that the coaches' positive affirmation of them as people resulted in the clients feeling positive about, and valuing, themselves.

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## Appendix IX: Biographies of participants

### *The coaches*

Four coaches were interviewed for the research project, two men and two women.

**Helen** began her career as an actor and director in the theatre; she has also worked as a lecturer and drama teacher. She spent 17 years directing and producing for the BBC. She set up her own consultancy in 1995, working as a media consultant, trainer and coach with a wide range of sectors. She has completed the MA in Coaching and Mentoring Practice at Oxford Brookes University, researching how theatre rehearsal techniques can be used in coaching.

**Simon** worked in human resources (HR) for a range of different companies and in a number of different roles. Before he started his own consultancy, he was VP of HR for a large region in the hotel industry. He has been working for over 40 years. He has been involved in coaching since 1990, working mainly at senior executive and Board level. He has had training in clinical psychology and person-centred counselling, as well as coaching.

**Julia** also worked in HR, for 23 years, with significant coaching elements to several of her positions, particularly when she was working as an internal consultant. She started working for herself in 1991, initially in career coaching. She has focused more on performance coaching in the last 6 years. She has qualifications in performance coaching and life coaching, and an Advanced Diploma from the Academy of Executive Coaching.

**Philip** worked in marketing and public relations, before deciding he wanted to be more involved with people development. From the early 1990s he worked for training organisations at a senior level on a number of development programmes. He has been working as an independent consultant since 2001. He balances management development, online training, and coaching and mentoring in his practice. He has qualifications in counselling, and coaching (from Oxford Brookes University).

### *The clients*

Four clients were interviewed for the research project, two men and two women.

**Angela** has worked in HR for 20 years in a number of industrial sectors, including hospitality and retail. For the last 5 years she has been employed in the engineering industry, focusing initially on organisational development and now on talent management. She completed the MA in Coaching and Mentoring at Oxford Brookes University, although coaching is not part of her current job requirement. She received coaching as part of her studies, and also has had coaching at work.

**Tony** worked for a number of catering organisations during his career. He had experience in grocery and beverages, and latterly he was looking after the retail category of service on motorways, and in railway and bus stations. He specialised in purchasing. He had recently been made redundant from a large catering company, and received coaching as part of an outplacement programme.

**Anne** was a qualified physiotherapist who had worked in a number of NHS hospitals. In 2004 she was promoted to her current role of physiotherapist manager. At the same time she started an MSc in Health and Social Care at Oxford Brookes University, which is where she first experienced coaching. She has continued to receive coaching privately since then.

**Graham** worked in HR for his entire career, including HR Director for a company in the finance sector. He left in 2001 and worked as an interim manager for just over 2 years, before becoming a consultant specialising in management development, psychometric profiling and coaching. He completed the MA in Coaching and Mentoring at Oxford Brookes University, and was receiving coaching as part of supervision.

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