



What To Do With The I Don't Know

By Ann Betz

In one of my coaching classes, we started the weekend by exploring the “thing we can’t be with.” In terms of coaching, I have to say, it’s probably that client who just keeps saying “I don’t know” or otherwise goes flat or blank, even with the best, most provocative, powerful question. Argh!! What the heck am I supposed to do with THAT? I’m not the magic fairy who will reveal your life purpose, nor am I the sherpa who will carry you up the hill.

But I am the curious brain examiner, so maybe it will help if we go there. Let’s start by looking at a few reasons why a client might get stuck in the I don’t know zone and what you could try if you think that’s what’s happening..

1. They are over-activated in the left hemisphere of their brain. This is often my working hypothesis when the “I don’t know” feels energetically more flat or rigid (the left hemisphere when very over-calibrated takes us to rigidity), and when it is in response to questions like “What do you want?” “What values are important to you?” “What if anything was possible?” etc. And here’s why—those questions are a bit more right hemisphere friendly (for more on the two hemispheres of the brain, see *Come On Over to The Right Side and Right Brain – Left Brain–Is It All A Myth?*), and if the client is currently (or habitually) stuck in their left hemisphere, they simply may not have any access at this moment.

What to do: You have a couple of options here. One is to ask some questions that are more left-hemisphere friendly, and luckily, this actually isn’t hard. The left hemisphere LOVES to judge, evaluate, and criticize. So ask the client to do this. Questions like “What are some of the things that don’t work in your current situation?” or even, “What drives you crazy?” can easily be flipped to mine for the client’s values. For example, if the client says, “I can’t stand the way my boss micro-manages me, it’s so insulting!” you can probe to see if the value is autonomy, respect, trust, etc. Ok, now we know at least one thing the client may want to shift or change. (Even before I knew about the brain, it was always so interesting to me, and I am sure to most of you as well, how often it was quicker and easier for a client to answer “what don’t you want?” than “what do you want?”)

The second option is to bring them into the right hemisphere, and the best way to do this is NOT through verbal language (which may actually keep them more stuck in the left). Instead, use images, metaphors, and connections to the body as your doorway in. It may help to say to a reluctant client something along the lines of: “In order to help you discover more of who you are and what you really want, we need to activate a part of your brain that is less strategic and linear. Don’t worry, we’ll come back to strategy and steps for implementation. But first we need to get you connected to something deeper, and this is the best way I know.”

2. They are over-activated in the right hemisphere of the brain. While the left hemisphere over-calibrated becomes rigid, the right becomes chaotic. So if I have a client who is all over the place in their not-knowing, and/or feels like any direction they take will cut off some other wonderful idea or possibility, this is my hypothesis. It can feel a lot like a car starting and stopping

or a tornado swirling, and I find it exhausting to coach. The client will start down a path that feels resonant, only to turn and double back again. Ack!

What to do: Again, there are a couple of options. Take them into it, or take them out of it. In the first, I often go with the swirl, first making it even a bit bigger (“Yes! and you could also do this, and this, and this!”) and then having the client view what their life is like down the road if they stay in this confusion and continue to keep all their options open. What does life look like? Is that what they really want?

In the second, I like to lean into the left hemisphere a bit by having the client get very linear about each option. Get it out of their heads and onto paper. Bulletpoint it. Make a spreadsheet or matrix. I actually love to help them with this (and sometimes I really need to if they are massively all over the place). You might say something like, “Let’s look at each thing, what it would take, and how you would feel about it. And don’t worry, you don’t have to commit right now to any of it. Let’s just get it all out of your head and onto the table where you can really look at it.” And of course, as we as coaches already know, once the client can actually look at all of it, they often start seeing patterns and realizing where the energy is.

3. They are overwhelmed or underwhelmed by stress. When we have either too much or too little stimulation going on in our lives, it can make it hard to think and focus. Our prefrontal cortex is needed for this function, and it likes to be in balance. I like to say that being stimulated, but not stressed is my happy, most productive place. If you have a client who is very bored, not well-used in their work or life, or who is barely managing to keep all the plates spinning, you may run into the “I don’t know.” Their brain is simply not in the right biochemical state **to** know!

What to do: This may be obvious, but the first thing is to help get their lovely brains back to the state where focus, direction, and some aspect of clarity are possible. If they are under-stimulated (this can happen when they are re-entering the workforce, have spent too long in the same job, are under-utilized at work, are disconnected from their purpose and passions, etc.), they simply need to get stimulated. Adding some challenge, stress, and interesting pursuits will spike the chemical balance in a positive direction.

And if (as many clients are) they are overwhelmed, over-scheduled, and overworked, look at this list for some research-based ideas (see below) for diminishing the chemical overload.

There may, of course, be other brain-related reasons a person gives you the “I don’t know,” but honestly, most of what I have encountered as a coach is some combination of the above. I hope this helps!

Stress Reduction Through Coaching

Stress is, if not one of the main reasons people come to coaching, certainly something that comes up with almost every client. I once heard the amazing (and now deceased) Dr. Paul Pearsall talk about having a balanced, healthy unstressed heart. His conclusion — it is perhaps impossible in today's world unless you live on a remote South Sea island.

In neuroscience geek world, we use the term “emotional regulation” for what is basically, the ability to deal with stress. And as I read through the literature, it dawned on me that this is a huge amount of what we do with our clients. We help them not only “emotionally regulate” in the moment of our conversation, but we also help them build skills for more competency in this area. In other words, we help them become more resilient and capable in the face of day to day life.

So let me walk you through what neuroscience seems to show are the most effective tools for dealing with stress, and how we most typically do this through coaching. In order of effectiveness, we have:

#0. Suppression - actively push feelings aside, pretend, “never let them see you sweat.” This one is not effective. At all. When people do this, they not only raise their own blood pressure, they raise the blood pressure of those around them. Don't do it. All together now: “Suppress Suppression!”

#1. Naming the emotion. As coaches, this is often how we start when someone is dealing with an emotional challenge — we ask, “What's going on?” We reflect what we are hearing, often teasing out deeper understanding for the client. The challenge of this strategy (as anyone who has worked with human beings for any length of time knows) is that people often don't know what they are feeling. As coaches, we help them understand and name through metaphor, by using our own intuition, through body sensations, and basically, any tool we have. Over time, we help people develop competence in this area so that they have more words and understanding of the vague sensations within (I'll talk about this more when I get to Right Brain/Left Brain).

I want to note that simple naming is far different than what I call “ramping it up,” which is what tends to happen in more day to day conversations, as our friends chime in with their own outrage. “He did that? Really?? You must be so mad!” etc. As coaches, we may allow a bit of venting, but then we redirect to more helpful strategies. I didn't even put ramping it up on this list because it is faaaarrrrr below suppression — when we indulge in this sort of dialogue we re-experience the emotion and create an even stronger neural pathway for pain and negativity — see my blog post [How Coaching Changes the Brain](#) for more on neural pathways.

Oh, and according to the research, it's the most effective when you have people write down how they are feeling. A great “off the call” tool to teach our clients.

#2. Controlling the environment so as not to encounter stressor. Interestingly, this may sound bad at first, but it is actually quite effective if you can do it. And we help our clients do this all the time. For example, we might explore options with them to get rid of a 60-minute commute. Or help them see they can make boundaries with an in-law. As coaches, many of us (myself included) have designed our lives for a more peaceful experience. I dislike office environments with fluorescent lights and people asking me for things all day long. So I am a coach and trainer, I often work at home in my pajamas while hanging out with my cats, voila, stressor controlled.

The reason I have this near the bottom of the list when it actually works so well (and some scientists argue is actually the most effective strategy) is that relying on control is probably a losing proposition. We simply can't (and shouldn't try) to control everything and everyone so as not to bug us. And the feeling of needing to be in control when you can't be actually causes more stress. Still, it works great when you can do it.

#3. Values and Purpose – Focusing on personal values and purpose can be a powerful way to shift focus, engage the higher brain, and of course, reduce stress. When we ask a client questions like “What is really important to you in this situation?” Or “What values do you want to honor?” Or even, “what values are NOT being honored here?” they often need to pause to consider. In other words, they can't answer in an automatic way, but must recruit additional brain regions such as the prefrontal cortex in order to thoughtfully answer the question. This tends to help the brain produce GABA, a factor in reducing stress.

#4. Reframing – finding an empowering way to look at the issue. Yes! A classic tool of coaching, which I have found in pretty much every coaching school. At CTI we call it Balance Coaching and it is highly effective at moving people from a place they are stuck, and often stressed, to a place where they begin to see they have options and choices. The act of reframing (also known as taking a new perspective or reappraisal) also invites the pre-frontal cortex to the party, calming down our stress responses (see Values, above).

#5. Mindfulness – meditation, being present to body sensations, focusing on gratitude/love. The number one, hands down, most effective solution to any neuroscience challenge. Stress, creativity, improving memory, being more emotionally intelligent, I kid you not. In my neuroscience class, we now just wait for it. “And new studies of meditating monks have shown....” again and again.

As coaches, I believe we absolutely help our clients become more “mindful.” Even just a good coaching conversation brings people present into the moment and makes them pay attention to what is going on, rather than putting their attention on regrets from the past or worries about the future. At CTI we have a particular tool we call Process coaching, where we take our clients deep into what they are experiencing, right here, right now. It can be almost like a guided meditation in dialogue, as we walk with them through a metaphor, or help them put their body sensations into words. It's powerful, and can release old patterns and issues that have been stuck for years, simply by helping people be present.

While any one of these strategies is scientifically shown to reduce stress, we have found that doing them in order is particularly helpful. It seems to be that each one can help bring the brain to a state where it is ready for the next step.