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TCP Journal Editorial Introduction

Hennie Geldenhuys, MD

There is a kind of doorway that has no door. You do not walk through it as much as you find yourself already standing inside it. You are no longer where you were, not yet where you are going. Transpersonal coaches call this the liminal space, a threshold. This fifth volume of the TCPJ journal gathers around that threshold.

Jevon Dängeli considers liminality through the lens of continuous trauma, where every moment becomes a threshold, where what comes before and after is threatening and ever-changing. Of what relevance are nice words like regulation, safety, and growth in these types of brittle and unpredictable settings (Dängeli, 2026)? Jevon's contribution is to show that persistent traumatic stress under such conditions cannot simply be resolved or glossed over. It must be accompanied. Open awareness and compassionate companionship become less a technique for crossing the threshold and more a way of dwelling within it without being consumed by it.

Jules De Vitto extends the liminal threshold inward (De Vitto, 2026). The porous psyche she describes is a kind of in-between space: a self not fully bounded, not fully dissolved into everything, but a membrane across which parts, energies and guides move according to the client's own spiritual and cultural grammar. Jules is careful not to resolve this porousness into fixed metaphysics. The coach's task, as she frames it, is to hold the doorway open safely without insisting on what stands on the other side of it.

The question of safety runs quietly beneath the whole volume. Rachael Baker-Searle's piece on modelling ventral vagal safety through polyvagal-informed somatic work gives us, in effect, the embodiment of the in-between (Baker-Searle, 2026). Before a client can explore any threshold, whether it be psychological, spiritual, or relational, the body must first believe

itself safe. Safety, in this sense, is not the opposite of liminality. It is what makes liminality survivable, even generative, in the holding of space.

Elina Viitaniemi gives this holding a name: grounded fluidity (Viitaniemi, 2026). Working with clients navigating identity transitions where the old self no longer fits and the new self is not yet formed, Elina reports that the coach's stability is precisely what allows the client's fluidity to be safe rather than frightening. It is a lovely paradox: the more securely the coach can hold the space still, the more freely the client can move through the morphing space between identities.

Some spaces are creases between different therapeutic disciplines. For example, Jeff Katzman (Katzman, 2026) considers how bipolar affective disorder is often the domain of pharmacologically driven psychiatry and pathology-focused psychotherapy, but that the blending of transpersonal coaching principles into that space can be refreshingly revolutionary.

Not every threshold is genuine. Sahaja Mascia Ellero's exploration of spiritual bypassing (Mascia Ellero, 2026) reminds us that spirituality itself can become a false doorway. It is a way of appearing to cross into transcendence while actually avoiding the very material that most needs integration. Sahaja's clients did not need less spiritual experience. They needed the safety and structure to let that experience meet, rather than bypass, what was unresolved underneath it.

Jo Nash brings the threshold home to the most intimate territory of all: the boundary of the Self in love and intimacy (Nash, 2026). Her client's journey from guarding against connection to yearning for it traces an arc in which protector parts step back only once enough safety has been established enough for the Self to lead. Safeguarding the soul, in Jo's telling, is not about keeping the door shut. It is about making sure someone trustworthy is holding it before it opens.

Darren Langer closes the circle by carrying the threshold forward a generation (Langer, 2026). Parenting, he suggests, is liminal, the space between who we were as children and who our own children are becoming. Old unresourceful patterns can either repeat

themselves or, held with enough open awareness, transform into something we hand down as wisdom and with compassion.

Eight articles, the same threshold. What holds across the liminality is not a technique but a quality of presence. It is the coach's capacity to stand steadily at the edge of the unknown with a client so that the in-between space stops being merely frightening and becomes, instead, where the work begins.

Congratulations to the editorial and production team. Their work behind the scenes is often thankless, but I see you. Thank you to the authors for pouring your souls into this work, from which a volume has emerged that dares to find resilience in the in-between.

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Navigating Chaos and Persistent Traumatic Stress with Open Awareness and Compassionate Companionship

Jevon Dängeli, PhD(c)

Abstract

The twenty-first century is increasingly characterised by persistent uncertainty, systemic instability, geopolitical conflict, climate disruption, rapid technological change, and growing social complexity. Cascio (2025) conceptualises these conditions as a *BANI world* — one that is *brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible*. Within such environments, traumatic stress is no longer experienced solely as a response to past events but increasingly emerges through prolonged exposure to unresolved threats. Consequently, contemporary trauma theory requires conceptual frameworks capable of understanding adaptation under conditions in which safety has not yet been restored. The article draws from the fields of Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2011), Interpersonal Neurobiology (Siegel, 2020), Compassion Focused Therapy (Gilbert, 2009), and Transpersonal Coaching Psychology (Dängeli *et al.*, 2022) not to propose a solution, but rather to reveal ways in which we can navigate BANI conditions and approach persistent traumatic stress with open awareness and compassionate companionship.

Keywords: chaos, BANI, persistent traumatic stress response, open awareness, compassionate companionship, transpersonal coaching psychology

Recommended citation

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Introduction

What does it mean to navigate chaos and ongoing traumatic stress, and is this even possible or desirable?

According to Jamais Cascio (2025), we live in an age of chaos, evidenced by global pandemics, wars, climate disasters, and political uncertainties. Recent years have been disorienting for many of us, often in unprecedented ways. Familiar systems have become unstable and problems seem to hit with greater intensity and impact. Devastation is ongoing, there is constant threat and the future seems more uncertain than ever. In Cascio's view, never before has it been this difficult to understand the bigger picture, and never before has it been this important that we do so (2025). This article explores the options and resources available to us, while considering the ramifications of persistent traumatic stress and how we as individuals and populations can move forward with open awareness and compassionate companionship.

Finding our way in an age of chaos

Jamais Cascio is a futurist who spent over 20 years thinking, researching, writing and speaking about what might happen in the world, speculating about possibilities and the consequences of those possibilities. In 2018 Cascio created *BANI*, an acronym for *brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible*. BANI is a sense-making framework — providing a lens to identify the variety of ways in which many people feel like their world is falling apart (Cascio, 2025).

Brittle describes the rigidity and fragility of the systems and technologies that we have come to rely on. Things and systems that are not elastic do not bend or just break cleanly when they stop working; they *shatter*. Brittle systems appear strong on the outside but are often weak and rotten on the inside.

Anxious shows up as we struggle to feel in control and navigate this complex, fast-paced, technologically driven and unstable era. News and social media constantly reveal the dysfunctionality of our political, economic, social, and environmental systems, which can provoke feelings of hopelessness, isolation and despair.

Nonlinear encapsulates how basic assumptions about cause-and-effect are no longer valid. Our systems have become less predictable and more unreliable.

Incomprehensible points to how unfathomable, senseless, ambiguous and absurd the world has become. This is an age of information overload, noise and confusion. Today's problems might not be simple nor complicated nor complex, but rather chaotic in their nature.

This is BANI, according to Cascio (2020, 2025). It illuminates systems and highlights how humans experience them in our everyday lives. Preceding this framework, in the 1980s, the U.S. Army War College created *VUCA*, an acronym standing *for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity* to describe the turbulent, unpredictable, and rapidly changing nature of the modern global environment (Syamsir, Saputra & Mulia, 2025). The concept of VUCA is still widely used in business, strategy, and leadership. Cascio created BANI to articulate what the VUCA reality feels like at present for many populations around the world. In this era of VUCA, or BANI, or chaos in general, it might be helpful to have a complementary framework for understanding how continuous threat is experienced across environmental, occupational, and neurobiological domains, so that trauma care can evolve to meet these challenges of our time.

Persistent Traumatic Stress Response

Trauma is not necessarily the result of what happened to the person in the past, but the result of what is currently happening inside them (Maté, 2022). In the BANI era, or continuous chaos, traumatic stress is not experienced solely as a response to past events, but

increasingly emerges through prolonged exposure to unresolved threats. Consequently, contemporary trauma theory requires conceptual frameworks capable of understanding adaptation under conditions in which safety has not yet been restored. Mainstream conceptualisations of trauma are still largely based on the traditional understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which emerged after the Vietnam War, where treatment focuses on resolving PTSD symptoms such as intrusive thoughts (flashbacks), avoidance, negative alterations in mood, and hyperarousal (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). As the following paragraphs will highlight, methods that were developed to help individuals recover from past traumatic events are increasingly recognised as insufficient for those living in environments of persistent danger or ongoing threat, where trauma is not "post", but current and anticipated in the future. This distinction is vital because conventional therapies often fail when a survivor cannot establish safety and stability in their present lived experience.

Persistent Traumatic Stress Response (PTSR) is introduced in this article as an overarching paradigm that brings together three contemporary frameworks — Continuous Traumatic Stress (Eagle & Kaminer, 2013), Persistent Traumatic Stress Exposure (Cogan, 2026), and Ongoing Traumatic Stress Response (Diamond et al., 2010) — each of which identify that trauma may be persistent rather than past. Although these three concepts share important theoretical assumptions regarding chronic exposure to threat, they differ in their primary focus, populations of interest, mechanisms of injury, and implications for intervention.

This article will describe each of the three frameworks and then weave together their commonalities into an encompassing paradigm, illuminating how BAMIs or continuous chaotic conditions may contribute to a widespread and persistent traumatic stress response across populations. Thereafter, the narrative will draw from the fields of Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2011), Interpersonal Neurobiology (Siegel, 2020), Compassion-Focused Therapy (Gilbert, 2009), and Transpersonal Coaching Psychology (Dängeli *et al.*, 2022) not to propose a solution, but rather to reveal ways in which we may navigate the challenges of our time with open awareness and compassionate companionship.

Continuous Traumatic Stress (CTS) is a psychological framework for understanding how living in a state of permanent emergency affects individuals and communities. While traditional theories of post-traumatic stress assume a person is now safe, CTS addresses those in active war zones, abusive homes, or systemic oppression where the threat never concludes. In developing the CTS concept, Eagle and Kaminer (2013) suggest that "CTS captures a domain of traumatic stress experience not adequately formulated in the existing repertoire of traumatic stress responses, but which characterises the lived experience of many individuals and communities around the globe" (p. 88). CTS acknowledges the environmental and geopolitical conditions that continuously shape psychological functioning. Key indicators of this condition include pervasive hypervigilance, profound exhaustion, and a sense of betrayal regarding their environment. Rather than viewing hypervigilance, anticipatory anxiety, and heightened threat perception as pathological symptoms, CTS conceptualises these reactions as adaptive responses necessary for survival. Treating CTS advocates prioritising harm reduction and community support for those facing persistent, unresolved trauma (Eagle & Kaminer, 2013; Neuner et al., 2008).

Persistent Traumatic Stress Exposure (PTSE) extends the concept of ongoing trauma into occupational, organisational and contextual settings. Developed in 2026 by mental health researchers, led primarily by Professor Nicola Cogan, PTSE examines cumulative psychological injury resulting from repeated exposure to traumatic events, including how organisational stressors, staffing shortages, moral injury, and insufficient institutional support collectively contribute to chronic psychological distress. The framework has become increasingly relevant among healthcare professionals, emergency responders, police officers, firefighters, military personnel, and mental health practitioners who routinely encounter trauma throughout their careers. PTSE reframes trauma as a predictable occupational hazard rather than solely an individual psychiatric disorder. This perspective emphasizes organizational preparedness, leadership responsibility, peer support, and workplace interventions alongside individual clinical treatment (Cogan, 2026).

Ongoing Traumatic Stress Response (OTSR) differs from both CTS and PTSE by focusing primarily on the clinical and neurobiological processes underlying trauma during periods of active threat. OTSR proposes that psychological symptoms fluctuate dynamically in response to changes in environmental danger rather than reflecting dysfunctional fear

patterns. Longitudinal research has demonstrated that anxiety, hyperarousal, and physiological stress responses increase during periods of heightened danger and decrease when external threats temporarily subside, illustrating a direct relationship between environmental conditions and symptom severity (Diamond et al., 2010). The OTSR framework is informed by translational neuroscience, which demonstrates persistent activation of the amygdala, dysregulation of hippocampal functioning, and alterations in stress hormone regulation during chronic exposure to danger (McEwen, 2007). Rather than viewing these biological adaptations as a psychopathology, those suffering with OTSR can be supported with neurobiological monitoring, trauma-aware psychoeducation, normalising adaptive responses, emotional regulation and coping skills (Diamond et al., 2010).

Complementary and distinguishing characteristics

Despite their conceptual differences, CTS, PTSE, and OTSR share several important characteristics. Firstly, each framework challenges the applicability of conventional PTSD diagnostic criteria and treatment methods for people who continuously confront potentially traumatic situations. Conversely, all three frameworks recognise that psychological responses must be interpreted within the context of current environmental realities rather than solely through retrospective symptom assessment (Cogan, 2026; Eagle & Kaminer, 2013; Diamond et al., 2010).

Secondly, all three concepts acknowledge the physiological consequences of prolonged activation of the body's stress-response systems. Continuous sympathetic nervous system activation contributes to chronic allostatic load, resulting in sleep disturbance, fatigue, impaired concentration, emotional dysregulation, chronic hyperarousal, and increased susceptibility to physical illness (McEwen, 2007). These physiological changes represent adaptive biological responses to sustained threat but may become maladaptive when prolonged indefinitely and aggravated by the perpetual instability and unpredictability of chaotic conditions.

What distinguishes these three frameworks lies in their respective units of analysis. CTS describes the effects of persistent societal danger, PTSE explains cumulative occupational exposure, and OTSR focuses on the ongoing interaction between environmental

threat and biological stress regulation. Together, these frameworks expand the understanding of trauma beyond traditional PTSD models. Each of these three concepts aims to address a contextual gap in the conventional understanding and treatment of trauma, with OTSR being applicable across contexts in which there is ongoing trauma, due to its focus on the neurobiological processes underlying trauma. Nevertheless, all three frameworks are based on the prevalence of trauma in extreme settings, with almost no focus on how comparable phenomena might occur in everyday life. Therefore, it would seem reasonable to suggest that one does not need to be in an ongoing life-threatening predicament, but that many types of highly stressful scenarios that persist, such as the BANI scenario, may also result in continuous sympathetic nervous system activation. This may force individuals into an ongoing survival mode, characterised by brittleness and anxiousness, among other detrimental effects (McEwen, 2007).

Bringing knowledge of CTS, PTSE, and OTSR together, it might become evident how this overarching paradigm of Persistent Traumatic Stress Response (PTSR) can also be identified where a persistent survival mode prevails among other contexts and populations other than those described in the previous three frameworks alone. Already in 2007, McEwen's review indicated that symptoms such as impaired concentration, emotional dysregulation and chronic illness have become a worldwide status quo. Today, the world is becoming increasingly complex, with the rapidly changing environmental, technological and social landscapes thrusting humanity ever more beyond what our nervous systems can handle, placing many of us on guard, struggling to keep up with daily demands, merely trying to survive in the modern era (Cascio, 2025).

Survival mode is an evolutionary adaptation where the nervous system is braced for danger, activating tunnel awareness, which focuses exclusively on what is threatening or painful, resulting in the fight/flight/freeze response (Porges, 2011; Gilbert, 2009). In a temporary emergency, tunnel awareness can be lifesaving, and in a state of permanent emergency, tunnel awareness feeds brittleness and anxiousness, as well as other forms of nervous system dysregulation and relational dysfunction (Siegel, 2020). You might identify where in your own life this contracted mode of survival persists. How are you affected by living in a chaotic/BANI world?

Open awareness and nervous system regulation — cultivating clarity and resilience

In their critical review of the evolution and interrelation of traumatic stress disorders, Hamadeh *et al.* (2025) call for a fundamental shift in our understanding and treatment of trauma toward universal context-sensitive frameworks that embed the structural and geopolitical determinants of psychological distress into practice. When the trauma is ongoing, interventions should avoid traditional therapies that aim to process the past and rather focus on grounding in the present moment, emotional regulation, building resilience, and establishing support communities (Avramchuk et al, 2026; Hamadeh et al, 2025). Reinforcing this sentiment, the APA Clinical Practice Guidelines (APA, 2025) for individuals experiencing ongoing trauma highlight that safety planning and resilience building may be more appropriate to their needs than interventions designed for PTSD, calling for an expansion of services offered in these contexts.

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore all the ways in which persistent traumatic stress response can be addressed in different contexts; therefore, I will describe one approach that can be applied across contexts to promote nervous system regulation, enhance mental clarity, and foster one's capacity to move forward with resilience.

As introduced earlier, persistent traumatic stress response (PTSR) may cause chronic tunnel awareness, impairing a person's ability to function optimally (Porges, 2011; Gilbert, 2009). This continuous survival mode holds the person's awareness hostage, narrowing their *window of tolerance* — a concept that Siegel uses to describe the optimal zone of arousal for a person to function in everyday life (2020). When a person is operating within their window of tolerance, they can effectively manage and cope with their emotions and stress levels. While traumatic stress is activated, the window narrows (tunnel awareness), which is an unconscious defence mechanism (survival mode) against threat (Siegel, 2020). Chronic tunnel awareness not only corrodes the immune system and psychological health (McEwen, 2007), it disconnects us from our own inner resources and the rest of reality, which may fester into further anxiety and brittleness (see Figure 1). Therefore, the capacity to re-open one's

aperture of awareness — from narrow and fixated, toward being more open, responsive and resourceful can be liberating.

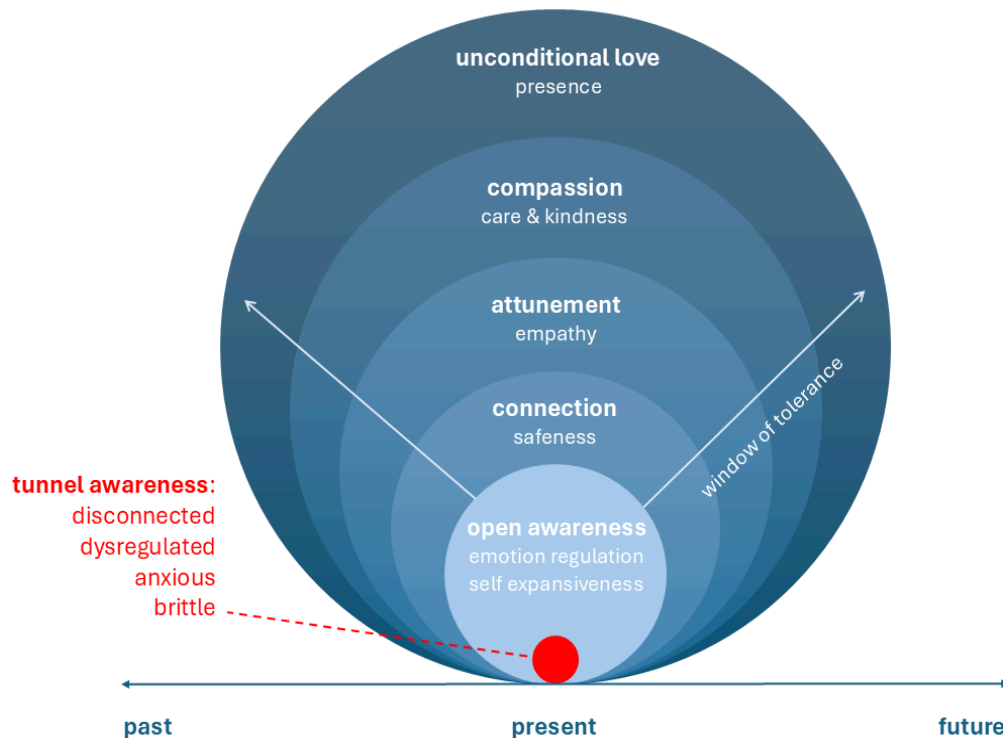
The opposite of tunnel awareness is open awareness, which my previous research (Dängeli, 2020) found to be a state of self-expansiveness that naturally fosters a tri-focal perspective inherent with the following three capacities:

- *Interoception & introspection* – metacognitive awareness in which we can mindfully observe mental activities, emotions, bodily sensations and somatic experience
- *Extrospection & outrospection* – heightened awareness of others and the ways we relate to them, fostering deeper connection and attunement, which in turn cultivates empathy and compassion
- *Envirospection* – broad awareness of the *living* space within and around us which connects us to everything in the environment and the cosmos

In PTSR scenarios, effective nervous system regulation incorporates all three of the abovementioned capacities, thereby underscoring the potential value of open awareness in this context. In coaching and therapy, applied open awareness can be useful to help move both individuals and groups out of tunnel awareness, opening their window of tolerance, thereby supporting nervous system regulation¹ while cultivating expanded states such as compassion and unconditional love, as shown in Figure 1 on the following page.

¹ It is not an objective of this article to discuss the various ways to regulate the nervous system, nor to propose a superior method than conventional approaches to trauma care. Nervous system regulation is by itself not a replacement for comprehensive mental health assessment and treatment with a qualified professional practitioner.

Figure 1. Apertures of Awareness



Applied open awareness is both a tri-focal perspective and the accompanying states shown in Figure 1, as well as the set of skills to access and embody these states.

As an example of applied open awareness, I will introduce one relatively simple and practical skill set that draws from Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2011), Interpersonal Neurobiology (Siegel, 2020), and the principles of judo — maximum efficiency with minimum effort, as well as mutual welfare and benefit (Kano, 2005). *Jumi (judo mind)* practice utilizes conscious breathing in conjunction with gentle movements to soothe the nervous system and expand one's *aperture* of awareness (window of tolerance) through accessing and embodying the state of open awareness. This allows people to gradually feel safe and resilient in their bodies again, and be more able to regulate their level of arousal according to their actual needs in the present situation. Of the many practices that may be beneficial in this regard, jumi is recommended as it is designed for the purpose of identifying when tunnel awareness has been activated, while providing versatile skills that are intended to help people reopen their aperture of awareness (Jumi, n.d.).

Scharmer (2019) asserts that when one faces continuous disruption, such as persistent traumatic stress, there are two possible responses: We can defensively close down and turn backwards [toward the past], or we can proactively open up and lean forward [toward the present and future]. Opening up and leaning forward in this way does not deny or override the mechanisms or symptoms of defensiveness; rather, it helps us recognise the mental, emotional and behavioural patterns that hold us back, thereby enhancing our capacity to respond in more resourceful ways. Applied open awareness (Dängeli, 2020, 2019) helps to somatically expand one's sense of self and their view of the situation – seeing the bigger picture – present, past and future. This fosters a resilient state and mental clarity, which, with the help of a compassionate companion, can be embodied and integrated into the traumatising context. The process promotes a person's capacity to live more fully in the present and to open up and lean forward toward the future that they want.

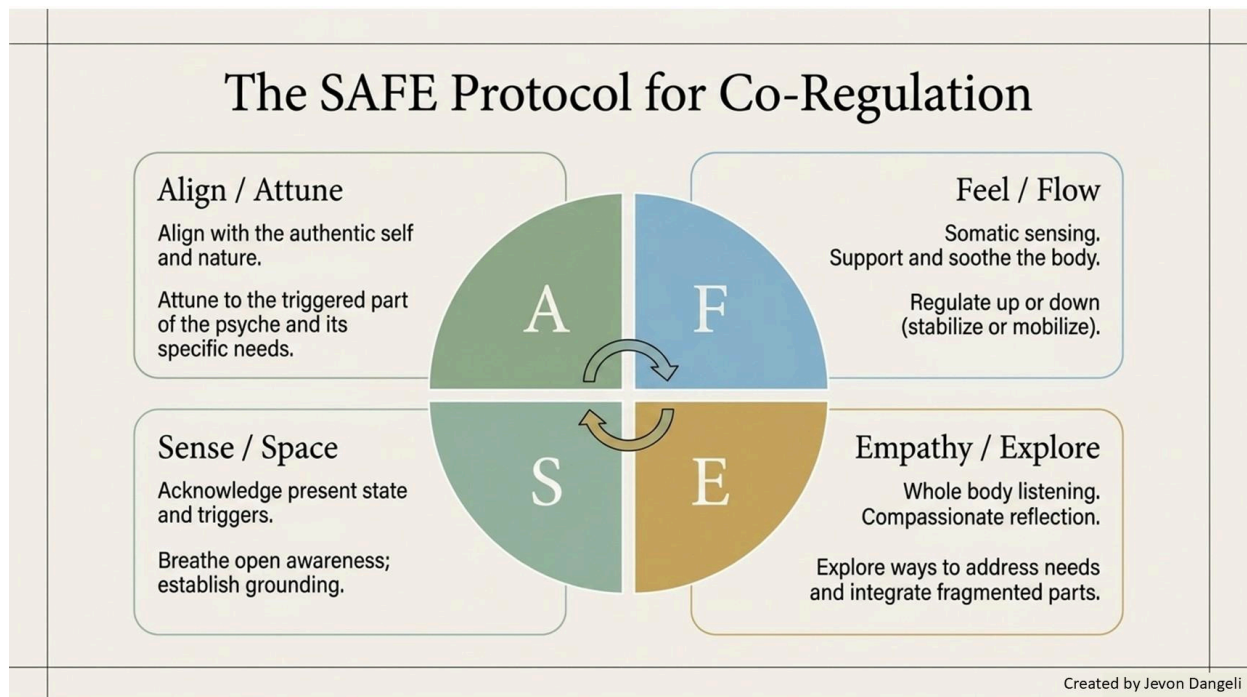
Compassionate companionship, safeness and co-regulation

Utilising the medium of open awareness to hold a grounded space for others, compassionate companions (CC) support trauma victims to feel seen, heard and understood. This primary role of the CC is to co-create an *island of safeness* within themselves and for others. *Safeness* refers to the combination of a felt sense of safety and resourcefulness that is co-created between the CC and other individuals. By following the SAFE Protocol (Figure 2.), compassionate companions can self-regulate their own nervous system while also helping others to achieve this through co-regulation. Furthermore, CC supports the recognition of our common humanity, foregrounding our shared struggles, imperfections, and interconnectedness (Neff, 2003). Common humanity reminds us that moments of pain are an inevitable part of being human, just as moments of joy, love and belonging are. This realisation also helps to regulate emotions and foster self-compassion (Kotera *et al.*, 2024).

In a previous article (Dängeli, 2023), I introduced the SAFE Protocol, which serves as a non-pathologising four-phase guideline that utilises the medium of open awareness for compassionate companions to help trauma victims identify and integrate the parts of themselves that have fragmented due to the pain of trauma. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the parts integration aspect of this approach; however, De Vitto (2025)

describes how the psyche becomes fragmented into parts due to trauma, and a holistic process for their integration.

Figure 2. SAFE Protocol for Co-Regulation



Open awareness and compassionate companionship, including the SAFE Protocol, form the basis of transpersonal coaching psychology (TCPJ, n.d.), which takes a holistic and integrative approach to support healing while harnessing the resources for the potential of post-traumatic growth.

Moving forward toward post-traumatic growth during adversity

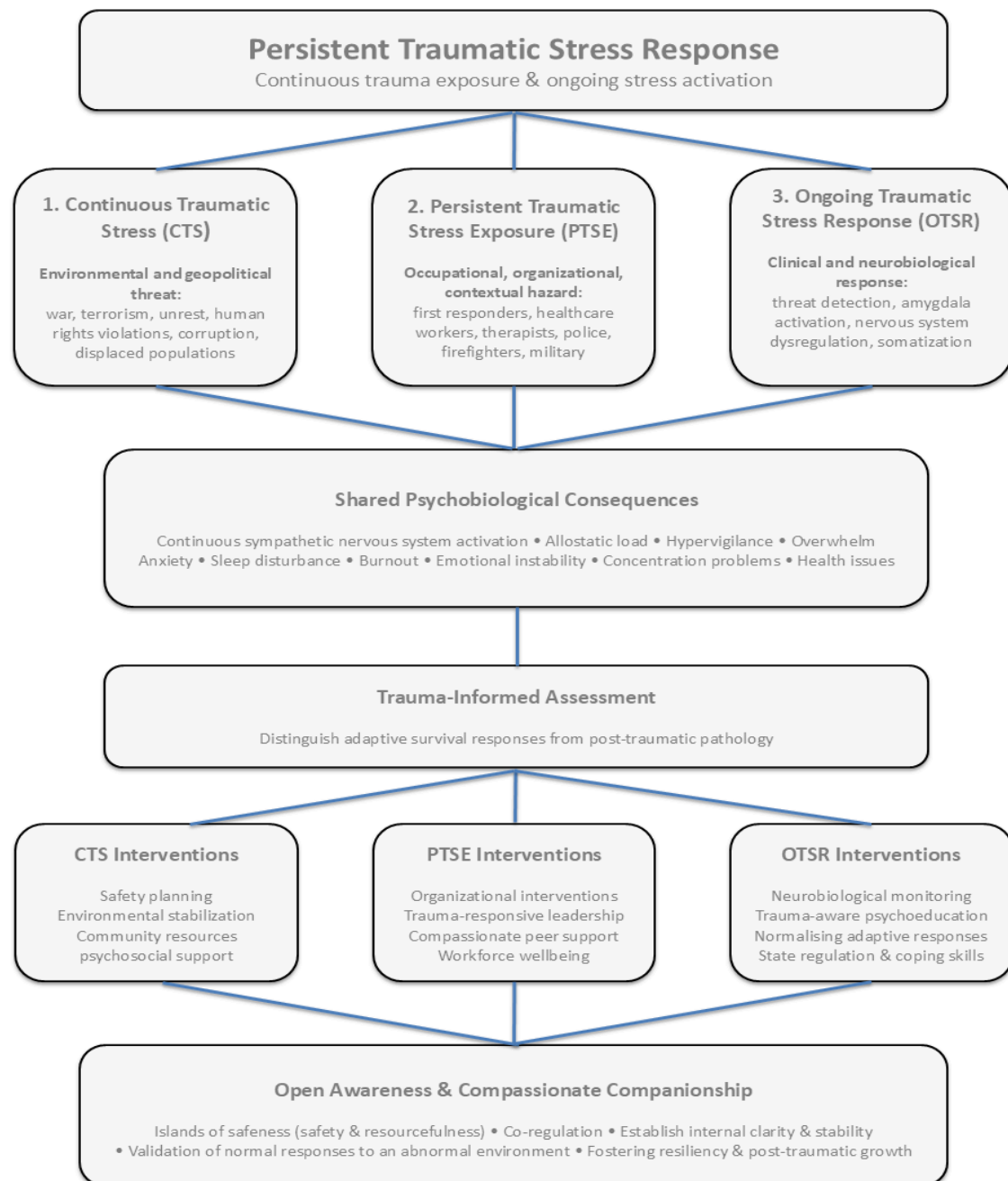
With an understanding of persistent traumatic stress response, post-traumatic growth cannot be meaningfully framed as something that occurs only after adversity. Rather, growth may be better understood as sustained functioning, adaptation, and meaning-making while the traumatic stress is ongoing (Cogan, 2026). In practice, this may be reflected in the development of greater capacity to regulate one's nervous system, context-specific risk

assessment, embodied skills (e.g. jumi) to move forward with clarity and resilience, compassionate peer support, and a deepened sense of purpose despite continued exposure to traumatic stress. Some frontline workers have described growth not as transformation following trauma, but as the ability to remain engaged, compassionate, and ethically grounded over time. Others report shifts in boundaries, values, and leadership practices that support both self-preservation and team functioning (Feingold *et al.* 2022). Framed in this way, growth becomes a dynamic and ongoing process that can be supported through open awareness and compassionate companionship. This reconceptualisation aligns with the BANI realities and situates post-traumatic growth within the PTSR paradigm (Figure 3.) as both an individual and collective phenomenon, rather than an endpoint.

In 2024, Cascio and Johansen conceptualised Positive BANI as a way of exploring the mental models needed to thrive in chaos. While the original BANI lens examined systemic disruption, Positive BANI reflects the ways in which we can strengthen ourselves, our organizations, and our communities to cope with a world, and a future, that sometimes appears to be falling apart (Cascio, 2025). Positive BANI is made up of four concepts intended to respond directly to the challenges posed by each BANI condition: Brittle is met by **Bendable**; Anxiety is countered by being **Attentive**; Nonlinear asks us to be **Neuroflexible**; and the Incomprehensible needs us to be **Interconnected**. These are not meant as solutions for specific BANI dilemmas, but as ways to empower a person or organization to respond to crises with clarity (Cascio, 2025).

While Cascio and Johansen have not directly proposed open awareness and compassion companionship (OA & CC) as a means to foster Positive BANI, with knowledge of how OA & CC can be applied by trauma-informed practitioners to co-create an island of safeness, a regulated nervous system, enhanced mental clarity and resiliency — as discussed in this article; it stands to reason that this approach would also support the establishment of Positive BANI, particularly regarding post-traumatic growth.

Figure 3. Persistent Traumatic Stress Response (PTSR) paradigm



The PTSR paradigm is an explanatory framework that shows potential ways in which we can navigate persistent traumatic stress with open awareness and compassionate companionship toward the possibility of post-traumatic growth.

Conclusion

Navigating the BANI world, or endless landscapes of continuous chaos, and managing persistent traumatic stress response (PTSR) effectively requires us to continually evolve our understanding of these phenomena and our ways of responding to them across contexts. The PTSR paradigm suggests that we adopt a multidisciplinary, community-led, and ethically grounded approach that addresses the entirety of the human experience. Establishing psychological well-being in this era warrants a paradigm shift in trauma care that is inextricably linked to the environmental and social context. For the trauma practitioner, PTSR proposes a move away from an exclusive focus on past-event processing, toward the cultivation of present and future safety and resourcefulness (safeness). The cultivation of open awareness, compassionate companionship and community connection to foster co-regulation, resilience and post-traumatic growth is encouraged. Mpande *et al.* (2013) suggest that implementing such healing interventions under conditions of ongoing threat and disruption is possible, supporting the potential of peace and security for our global community to thrive.

The open awareness and compassionate companionship approach is not being suggested as a solution to PTSR, but rather as a compass, guiding individuals and groups to live more fully in the present moment, and to resourcefully navigate ways forward toward a meaningful and more sustainable future for all.

A parting poetic thought

*The nervous system is not asking us to be fearless,
It is asking us to listen,
Every sensation carries a story,
Every emotion points toward a need,
And every moment of genuine safeness becomes an opportunity to remember who we are
beyond survival.
Healing begins not when we silence the nervous system,
but when we learn its language with patience, curiosity, openness and compassion.*

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The Porous Psyche: Expanding Parts Work in Transpersonal Coaching

Jules De Vitto, MSc

Abstract

This article explores the existence of transpersonal phenomena, such as parts, energies, and guides, that go beyond the individual psyche in the context of transpersonal coaching. It examines how these are conceptualised within various spiritual traditions and how the emergence of such experiences may be worked within transpersonal coaching. The purpose is not to assert ontological truth in terms of the existence of these phenomena, or define them in fixed terms, but to highlight that clients may experience these parts, energies or guides in various ways, and this is often dependent on their spiritual or cultural background. The article concludes that the most crucial component of this exploration is that transpersonal coaches or practitioners can hold space for this phenomenon to arise without pathologisation, whilst also maintaining ethics, scope of practice and awareness of spiritual emergence or emergency. The article explores how this is done through open awareness and a parts-coaching process that can be successfully applied in the context of transpersonal coaching.

Keywords: parts work, internal family systems, porous mind, energies, guides, parts coaching process, transpersonal coaching

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Introduction

The concept of multiple parts existing within the psyche has long been recognised in transpersonal psychology and transpersonal coaching psychology (TCP), and it has also gained widespread popularity in recent decades through Internal Family Systems (IFS), founded by Richard Schwartz (Schwartz, 2021). While the IFS model has been largely embraced within mainstream therapeutic approaches, including the domain of coaching, the notion that the individual psyche is porous and that there are *parts*, *energies* or *guides* that exist beyond the individual psyche remains less widely accepted (Jung, 1968; Schwartz, 2021). Although this perspective is slowly gaining more recognition, it is still frequently dismissed by mainstream coaching or therapeutic modalities. In this article, I propose that a purely intrapsychic model of parts work is insufficient and that integrating transpersonal phenomena (such as guides, energies and ‘external’ parts) is necessary. I will explore how different psychological and spiritual traditions conceptualise these parts, energies and guides and how they may be approached ethically and effectively within transpersonal coaching practice. The aim of this article is not to determine metaphysical ‘truth’ but to draw on various perspectives within the transpersonal literature and then discuss how we can approach working with parts, energies, or guides as transpersonal coaches.

Intrapsychic Parts

Parts of the psyche are commonly understood as distinct inner aspects of ourselves that carry their own beliefs, emotions, memories, values, and behaviours (Dängeli, 2022). William James (Hutchins & James, 1952) was among the first to conceptualise the ‘various selves’, recognising that the human psyche is not a singular, unified entity but made up of multiple aspects that may at times be in harmony and at other times in conflict. There is agreement across various modalities that parts often develop particular beliefs, behaviours

and emotions, which, although they are intended to keep an individual from harm, often form because of previous trauma, difficult life events, or harm inflicted on the individual. The strategies that parts develop can become rigid and outdated, resulting in emotions, beliefs, or behaviours that keep people stuck in cycles of self-sabotage or suffering (De Vitto, 2025).

Within Internal Family Systems (IFS), parts are differentiated into three distinct categories: *exiles*, which carry unresolved pain and vulnerability; *managers*, which attempt to control and prevent pain from surfacing (for example, through perfectionism or self-criticism); and *firefighters*, which react when pain breaks through, often in impulsive or numbing ways such as addiction or dissociation (Schwartz, 1995). IFS states that beneath all of these parts is the Self, a core, undamaged aspect of our being that is characterised by qualities such as compassion, calm, clarity, and courage (Schwartz, 2021). This concept of Self is known as the *authentic Self* (Dängeli, 2022) in transpersonal coaching and is understood to exist ‘within’ and ‘beyond’ us, where it is connected to a larger ‘whole’. This aligns with many other spiritual traditions and psychological modalities (De Vitto, 2025), such as Jungian Psychology, where the Self represents the totality of an individual's psyche, including both the conscious and unconscious aspects (Jung, 1953). Furlong (2022) and other modalities such as psychosynthesis further differentiate between a Core Self and a Transpersonal Self - the transpersonal Self being non-local and synonymous with the higher Self (Assagioli, 1965).

It is important to acknowledge that many parts within the psyche carry the essence of Self and are not inherently ‘bad’, but they often develop protective adaptations that try to keep one safe at a particular stage in one’s life (Schwartz, 1995). Those protective adaptations or survival mechanisms are often driven by parts that continue to act on unconscious impulses formed in response to earlier experiences (Levine, 1997). The goal in transpersonal coaching is to meet the parts with curiosity and compassion by acknowledging the part’s role (what they do), uncovering their underlying values (why they do what they do) and their underlying need. Thus, creating conditions in which they can shift into more constructive, healthy, and aligned roles with the authentic Self.

The Porous Mind: Expanding the Model

Robert Falconer challenges the ‘citadel mind’ model of the human psyche, which suggests that the psyche is always sealed off from the exterior (Falconer, 2023). This representation of the mind appears to be a Western cultural construct in which the self is imagined as enclosed and private (the citadel model), in contrast to other cultures and traditions that envision a more open, ‘porous’ mind. It is important to recognise that many spiritual traditions and psychological modalities do acknowledge the existence of transpersonal, collective, and external influences that can impact the individual psyche, which Robert Falconer refers to as the porous mind (Falconer, 2023).

These external influences are most often distinguished from intrapsychic parts because they do not carry the essence of one’s Self (Falconer, 2023). There are also archetypal, intergenerational or transpersonal energies that may enter our system and impact the behaviour of intrapsychic parts. In IFS, Richard Schwartz refers to these as ‘unattached burdens’ or ‘legacy burdens’ (Schwartz, 2021). What is important about identifying these energies or burdens is that they do not belong to the individual and therefore need to be released rather than integrated (Falconer, 2023).

When we acknowledge the mind (and its parts) as more porous and fluid, as Dan Siegel states, ‘more verb than a fixed noun-like entity’ (Siegel, 2012), the possibility that there are parts, energies or guides that can enter (or leave) becomes much more viable. However, it is important to note that this concept of a porous mind does not negate the existence of a coherent Self or an ‘individual’ identity - it is both/and in that we have an individual Self which is also embedded in an interdependent, collective matrix that we are constantly in relationship with. I propose that including the awareness of transpersonal phenomena (not only intrapsychic parts) is crucial in transpersonal coaching, as it situates the coaching process within a wider collective field rather than being an isolated individual process.

Cross-Cultural Conceptions

There are many spiritual traditions that recognise the existence of entities or phenomena, analogous to energies or parts, that don't belong to the individual but can penetrate human consciousness. In shamanism, invisible spirits or entities are taken as ontologically real and considered to have their own will, intention, and sometimes independent existence (Harner, 1980). Many shamanic healing practices involve soul retrieval (where a fragment of the soul is restored) and extraction (removing unwanted energetic intruders), which aligns closely with the concept of integrating parts of the psyche and removing what IFS refers to as unattached burdens or legacy burdens (Schwartz, 2021). These burdens or energetic intrusions are often considered to be strong emotions or beliefs that parts end up carrying and are often inherited by the collective or through intergenerational trauma. There are also entire parts, entities or intrusions that can enter an individual's system (Furlong, 2022). For example, spiritism holds the view that non-embodied spirits can interact with humans, sometimes influencing one's psyche. Spirits are understood to be disembodied intelligences, often souls of deceased people that can influence, guide, or attach to living people under certain conditions. Tibetan spiritual traditions describe spirits as 'hungry ghosts' that can attach to humans (Trungpa, 1975), which resonates strongly with the concept of Wetiko - a concept taken from the Indigenous people of North America (Levy, 2013). Wetiko is conceptualised as a mind-parasite that feeds on fear, separation, and unconsciousness. It can result in individual and collective 'psychosis' and is both personal and archetypal.

African spiritual traditions also support the concept of a porous psyche, and central to this understanding is the role of ancestors, which are understood to communicate through dreams and visions - serving as guardians and intermediaries between the human and divine. African spirituality also proposes that the physical and spiritual realms are in constant exchange, with what occurs in one realm directly impacting the other (Marumo & Chakale, 2018). This worldview further challenges the 'citadel mind' model, suggesting the psyche is inherently open and relational rather than sealed and private.

Spiritism, shamanism, Tibetan Buddhism, Indigenous Traditions of North America, African Spiritual Traditions, and IFS all differentiate internal psychological parts and phenomena experienced as external, archetypal, or transpersonal. Rather than being integrated in the same way as internal parts, such phenomena are typically approached through a process of release or transformation within the healing context. This aligns with the approach of transpersonal coaching, which I will discuss in further detail in the application section.

Trauma and Archetypal Defences

Donald Kalsched proposes a slightly contrasting view in that trauma can activate archetypal defensive structures within the psyche that are experienced as autonomous or foreign, but they arise from within the individual's inner world (Kalsched, 1996). He proposes that trauma causes a soul aspect of the self to retreat, and other parts to develop and take on archetypal defences in order to protect the psyche. Rather than supporting the individual, these protective archetypal defences end up traumatising the psyche even more. Donald Kalsched came to understand that it is the dissociation and regression of - what he referred to as the soul - alongside the progressive creation of the false self that results in the tragic symptoms of trauma, but this is also what enables one's survival (Kalsched, 1996). These protective parts of the person can therefore be understood as forces in the psyche that keep unproductive suffering alive and prevent one from reaching a coherent whole connected with the sacred.

Guides and Helpers

It is important to recognise that not all energies are harmful to the individual, and many spiritual and psychological traditions acknowledge the existence of spiritual presences (Furlong, 2022), including angels, ancestors, animals and light beings - that may arise during the healing or coaching process (Schwartz, 2021). This is particularly evident in African spiritual traditions, where ancestors are understood as quasi-material beings who actively inhabit the lives of the living (Cordeiro-Rodrigues & Agada, 2022). This perspective aligns with most shamanic systems, which consider guides to be real, autonomous beings with

whom the shaman or one journeying through shamanic realms forms a relationship (Harner, 1980). Jungian psychology speaks of archetypal figures that can appear as guides, mentors, or wise old men/women who represent deep structures of the psyche (Jung, 1968). These figures are typically understood as aspects of the collective unconscious, and Jung remained open to their semi-autonomous reality.

When working with a client in transpersonal coaching, the question of whether these parts, energies, guides, or helpers exist as ontological realities becomes less important than attending to the client's belief system and present-moment experience (De Vitto, 2025). What is important is that the transpersonal coach stays open, accepting, and non-judgmental when a client becomes aware of such guides, energies or parts arising during the coaching session.

When integrating or acknowledging guides or 'other' energies, we must also continue to work within an ethical framework and be conscious of our scope of practice (Geldenhuys, 2024). For example, we need to be discerning and educated about spiritual emergence and spiritual emergency. Spiritual emergence refers to a gradual, often enriching process of awakening to expanded states of consciousness and a deeper sense of connection with the self, others, and the universe. A spiritual emergency tends to be a more intense and often disruptive experience, which happens when the process accelerates or intensifies beyond the individual's capacity to integrate and cope; it can lead to states of crisis (Grof & Grof, 1989). Various experiences can unfold - including a client's awareness of spirit guides. Many mainstream approaches to coaching and therapy dismiss or pathologise such experiences; however, a transpersonal coach seeks to differentiate between spiritual experiences which can be supported and those which may need to be referred on. Most importantly, transpersonal coaches work with clients from a variety of cultural and spiritual backgrounds; therefore, they need to be careful not to frame ancestral or spiritual experiences through a purely Western psychological lens, which tends to pathologise such experiences. Recognising a client's level of meta-cognitive awareness, looking out for experiences of dissociation (Geldenhuys, 2024), or encouraging medical evaluation and referrals is crucial to rule out pathologies (Lukoff, Lu, and Turner, 1998). I also propose that an awareness and recognition of cultural, religious or spiritual background keeps us trauma-informed and culturally sensitive.

Application in Transpersonal Coaching

In transpersonal coaching, we attempt to work with these parts, energies or guides in the same way regardless of how we interpret or perceive the parts - this is by maintaining open awareness and staying anchored in our authentic Self (Dängeli & Geldenhuys, 2018). It is open awareness that offers us the capacity and space to meet the parts with curiosity, compassion and stay present with the parts or energy without being consumed by fear or resistance. Through a Part's Coaching Process (De Vitto, 2025), we explore what form the part or energy has taken and how we feel, sense, hear or see its presence. We attempt to stay in relationship to the part so we can explore the beliefs, emotions, values, purpose, and needs of the part or energy. The ability for the coach and client to stay anchored in open awareness and the energy of one's authentic Self is crucial here, so we can discern what we are working with. By examining the part's values and purpose, we can further clarify its intention and need. The presenting need of the energy or part may be to receive, release, let go, or transform. I propose that, within the applied domain of transpersonal coaching, adopting a label of 'negative' vs 'positive' (in relation to the part of energy) is not helpful for the client's healing process - what's more important is meeting it in open awareness, with compassion, and seeking to understand its underlying values, purpose, and needs. Levy (2013) also offers a valuable perspective: parts or energies only have power over us when they remain unconscious. Whenever we bring them into awareness and meet them without fear or resistance, their power naturally diminishes.

Conclusion

Recognising that the psyche is not entirely closed off but is instead porous and interconnected with the wider collective invites us to hold a more nuanced understanding of the parts and energies we encounter within ourselves and within transpersonal coaching. By going beyond a purely intrapsychic model, we are better able to discern the intentions of different parts - whether they are protective aspects of our own system, burdens inherited through collective or intergenerational trauma, or external energies seeking resolution. Approaching all of these with compassion, curiosity, and open awareness allows us to meet each part or presence from the grounded space of Self, rather than fear or resistance.

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Grounded Fluidity: Supporting Identity Exploration Through Transpersonal Coaching Psychology

Elina Viitaniemi, MA

Abstract

This case study explored how Transpersonal Coaching Psychology supported six clients navigating identity transitions where familiar structures no longer felt coherent. Through analysis of eighteen sessions, a consistent practice stance emerged that combined a stable liminal container with adaptive methodological responsiveness—termed "grounded fluidity." The stable ground was created through Open Awareness practice, embodied coach presence, and participatory field, enabling methods to emerge responsively: somatic inquiry when clients looped in cognitive processing, parts dialogue when inner conflicts appeared, perspective-shifting when internalized voices needed distance, and symbolic work when identity tensions surfaced. Clients moved from uncertainty and fragmentation toward recognizing where old identities no longer fit and orienting toward more authentic directions. Analysis revealed how this stance enables coaches to work pluralistically across diverse modalities while maintaining epistemological coherence—a distinction between integrative practice and eclectic technique-borrowing with practical implications for practitioners accompanying clients through threshold spaces.

Keywords: transpersonal coaching, grounded fluidity, identity transition, Open Awareness, liminal space, adaptive responsiveness, integrative practice

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Introduction

Clients often enter coaching when the identity structures that once gave direction no longer fit. This can show up, for instance, as career exhaustion, tension between external achievement and inner dissatisfaction, or a sense that earlier roles have become constraining. These threshold spaces can feel uncertain and disorienting. They have an in-between quality resembling what Turner (1969) described as liminality, where old forms loosen before new forms stabilize. Bridges (2004) similarly named this the neutral zone of transition, emphasizing that psychological reorientation requires containment rather than immediate problem-solving.

Coaches working with clients in identity transition face a persistent challenge: these threshold states require stable holding, yet each person's readiness, protective patterns, and nervous system capacity shift moment to moment. Fixed protocols risk missing what clients actually need; purely client-led approaches may lack the structure these vulnerable in-between spaces require. Transpersonal Coaching Psychology (TCP) addresses this paradox through what this study identifies as 'grounded fluidity'—a practice stance combining a consistent liminal container with adaptive methodological responsiveness.

Through analysis of eighteen sessions with six clients, this case study demonstrates how stable participatory presence created through Open Awareness enables diverse methods to emerge responsively while maintaining coherent therapeutic direction. The ground (stable container, embodied presence, participatory field) enables the fluidity (methodological variation, pacing adjustments, emergent approach selection) without devolving into eclectic incoherence. This distinction between integrative pluralism and technique-borrowing has practical implications for practitioners accompanying clients through identity reorganization.

Method

This report draws on eighteen online coaching sessions with six women clients between October and December 2025. All clients were navigating professional and/or personal transitions where familiar identity structures no longer felt coherent. In some cases, this threshold was not named directly but became visible through themes such as time management difficulties, overwhelm, or role conflict. What initially appeared as practical concerns sometimes revealed deeper identity questions through the coaching process. Sessions drew on the Transpersonal Coaching Model (Dängeli, 2022), which provides a framework for exploring ten interrelated levels—State, Trigger, Behaviour, Identity, Beliefs, Values, Mission, Vision, Purpose, and Source—typically moving from the client's current experience toward deeper dimensions of meaning and back to embodied integration. In practice, the sequence and emphasis were adapted fluidly according to each client's arising needs rather than following a prescribed progression.

Analysis employed inductive thematic analysis, identifying patterns across session transcripts, journal reflections, and client feedback rather than applying predetermined frameworks.

All clients gave informed consent for coaching and for anonymised material use in this case study. Each client engaged in three sessions, giving only partial views of longer identity processes.

Results

Across sessions, clients arrived in states where familiar identity structures no longer felt coherent. Presenting concerns ranged, for example, from uncertainty after career shifts or retirement to dissonance between external pressures and inner calling. Underneath these differences, each stood in threshold space. What emerged as essential was creating a stable container and responding adaptively to what arose within that space.

Creating the container began before each session, when I settled my own nervous system and entered Open Awareness (OA)—a state of spacious, receptive presence where attention expands beyond narrow focus—through meditation and breathing practices so I could meet the client from a steady, regulated state. In sessions, I opened with simple landing and space for clients to name what they were arriving with, then invited OA practice adapted

to their state and presenting issues. Throughout sessions, I used brief somatic, imaginal, or spatial micro-practices to regulate activation, deepen exploration, or bring clients back into steadiness. The sequence varied, but the intention remained to create a steady, receptive field. One client described the space after her first OA practice: "If there is any place I can get guidance or answers, it's from there."

Maintaining this container sometimes required careful attention to pacing. One client contacted an earth-connected sensation in her lower belly and touched something profoundly challenging. I noticed somatic cues indicating intensity and asked whether she wished to continue. She chose to pause rather than ground herself or close the process. We ended with the material still active, and I checked in the following day.

The container's holding extended beyond sessions. Several clients reported that material touched during our meetings continued to work in them between sessions, allowing integration to unfold in its own time. One client described how personalized guided meditations recorded after each session "turned three sessions into a months-long journey rather than a one-shot tranquilizer."

Within this held space, responsiveness was central. This often involved guiding clients from cognitive processing to embodied awareness. When clients stay in analytical thinking, they often loop in familiar patterns without accessing new information. The body holds implicit knowing that precedes conscious thought. One client working with conflicting inner parts paused, saying, "It has always been difficult for me to verbalise these things." I invited her to shift into bodily sensing instead. As she breathed into the area where she felt a ball of tension, she said she felt a message from it: "You need to let go."

Responsiveness also meant adjusting the overall pace of sessions to match clients' nervous system state. One client arrived activated, describing herself as "running everywhere constantly." I slowed the tempo and invited her to breathe and arrive. Her system settled enough for deeper work to become possible.

Different approaches emerged organically from what clients' processes called for. Parts work—dialoguing with distinct aspects of self that hold different needs or perspectives—appeared frequently, often through bodily sensations. One client sensed tension in her jaw during an awareness practice and described it as a red square. Through dialogue, she understood it as a signal to stop pretending everything was fine and show more

authenticity. Another client experienced a protective part as heavy medieval armour. Through guided interaction, the armour melted and poured into her spine, shifting from constriction into support.

Parts work revealed how identity can reorganize through inner conflict. One client moving from consensus-builder to decisive leader felt two distinct parts: stomach tightness pulling her to withdraw, steady pressure pushing her to engage. Through dialogue with both, she recognized the withdrawing part wasn't something to overcome but a capacity she could bring into leadership differently. From this understanding came practical shifts: slowing her conversational pace, asking for preparation time before difficult conversations. This parts-based approach allowed her to relate to the conflict as an internal dialogue rather than a personal failing, revealing how both impulses served protective functions that could be integrated rather than resolved through choosing one over the other.

These approaches remained within coaching boundaries. Sessions focused on the client's stated intentions rather than treating psychological conditions. Parts work emerged responsively as one method among others, not as primary therapeutic intervention, to help clients access their own knowing and make conscious choices.

Perspective-shifting—moving between self, other, and observer positions—emerged when clients needed distance from internalized voices. This creates psychological space from beliefs that feel absolute when experienced from inside them. One client recognized her internal pressure to perform was her mother's voice. Moving between self, mother, and observer positions, she realized: "What she wanted for me came through her own filters. I'm a different person, and I need to honour that." She said the session "unblocked" something in her, creating an unexpected "jump forward".

Symbolic and imaginal material revealed identity tensions and their transformation. One client's frustration with a work project appeared as an ugly, rotting apple that said, "This is not what I signed up for." By the second session, a new image emerged: a bronze pendulum swinging steadily, communicating "it's going to be okay"—a shift from decay to steadiness as the system reorganized.

While sessions emphasized receptive exploration, they consistently moved toward identifying concrete next steps. One client identified using her current teaching role as a sounding board for course design she had long delayed. Another named creating visual

reminders and breathing practices to stay present during conflict. A third recognized slowing conversational pace as her boundary-keeping strategy. These actions emerged from what clients discovered in their inner work, not from external advice or strategic planning.

Discussion

Grounded fluidity is the capacity to create a stable liminal container while allowing methods, pacing, and form to emerge responsively from what the client needs in each moment. The term names how TCP's epistemological foundations translate into lived coaching presence. The container provides ground, and responsiveness provides fluidity. This stance developed through trusting what the held space makes possible and meeting what arises without predetermined direction.

The Liminal Container

Holding uncertainty without premature resolution proved essential for identity reorganization. Bridges (2004) emphasizes that psychological reorientation occurs in the neutral zone—the fertile void between endings and new beginnings. Turner's (1969) concept of liminality clarifies why threshold states require ritual containers: identity structures are temporarily loosened, making the space both generative and vulnerable. When clients arrived with uncertainty about themselves, the liminal container normalized not-knowing as the necessary condition for new ways of being to emerge.

In her sessions, a client described being "in the crack between" and "a snake shedding its skin." De Vitto (2023) observes that liminal space created through OA enables clients to access unconscious material through intuitive insights and images. Dängeli and Geldenhuys (2022) describe OA as the method for creating this container, allowing a shift from fixated tunnel awareness to openness and receptivity. The container's quality depended on my own state: arriving to sessions settled in OA allowed me to hold steady, responsive space for whatever emerged.

Adaptive Responsiveness

Responsiveness came through ongoing attunement to breath patterns, conversational pacing, somatic cues (e.g. changes in posture, tension in jaw or shoulders, shifts in voice quality), and subtle shifts in readiness. Identity reorganization cannot follow predetermined steps because each person's threshold has unique activation points and protective patterns. In sessions, I shaped my presence according to who the client was and where they were at by

reading cues, following intuition and adjusting in the moment. This was guided by internalized transpersonal coaching principles rather than spontaneous reactions, expressed in choices such as slowing a client's activated arrival.

The responsiveness required attending particularly to what the body held. Gendlin's (1981) work on the felt sense—the pre-verbal bodily sense of a situation's meaning—demonstrates why: implicit meaning about identity is held bodily before becoming conscious thought. When one client explored mixed feelings about a job she had been turned down for, she remained analytical until I invited her to imagine actually receiving the offer. Embodying the scenario brought an immediate somatic response: "I feel heaviness. I would have to put back on the mask I had before." Her body revealed what her narrative about regret had obscured.

Methods varied across sessions: reflective questioning, guided meditations, nervous system regulation, parts dialogue, perspective shifting, symbolic imagery. What kept them coherent was the participatory ground from which they emerged. Participatory epistemology (Ferrer, 2002) holds that transformation arises through direct engagement within a relational field, not through the coach analysing the client from outside. In this view, knowing emerges through shared presence and embodied inquiry—both coach and client participate in discovering what wants to unfold. This contrasts with approaches where the coach observes and interprets while remaining separate from the client's process. This epistemology explains why identity work requires multiple pathways: identity reorganization involves somatic patterns, imaginal self-representations, relational dynamics, and transpersonal dimensions simultaneously. These pathways are accessed through the client's direct, embodied engagement with felt experience.

This is grounded fluidity's most generative quality: the epistemological ground stays stable while methods evolve freely. Coaches can draw on diverse practices, bringing their own expertise and specializations, while their work remains recognizably TCP because the foundation holds steady even as forms shift.

Navigating Inherent Tensions

This approach carries paradoxes that require ongoing navigation. The most persistent tension emerged around outcomes. Transpersonal coaching doesn't reject action orientation but grounds it differently. Rather than predetermined goals, next steps emerge from what

clients discover through exploration. Sessions consistently moved from receptive space to identifying concrete applications, not as external plans imposed on insights, but as natural extensions of the work itself.

A related challenge involved preparation. Adaptive responsiveness means you cannot plan sessions in advance but meet what the client brings. This openness is both the approach's strength and its challenge. It requires trust that the method needed will emerge if presence remains steady.

Sustaining this stance requires ongoing practitioner development. Grounded fluidity depends not on technique mastery but on the coach's capacity to remain present, resourced, and undefended. Without ongoing personal practice, responsiveness risks becoming reactivity. The coach's inner stability creates the field's stability, and the field, in turn, can steady the coach. The liminal container operates bidirectionally: holding the space can expand the coach's own state—the field's coherence affects both participants. This aligns with Ferrer's (2002) participatory epistemology: transformation occurs through the relational field itself, not solely within the designated client.

Conclusion

This case study examined how Transpersonal Coaching Psychology supports identity exploration during transitions. Across six clients, grounded fluidity enabled substantive work. Clients recognized where old identities no longer fit and began orienting toward new possibilities. One described meeting herself "with more compassion and curiosity, rather than judgement." Another said the work "helped me slow down enough to actually hear myself." A recurring pattern emerged: clients discovered they already held the wisdom they sought.

This work revealed core elements of the stance. The container's quality depended on both the practices offered and the coach's internal state. Adaptive responsiveness manifested through pacing, somatic attunement, and depth adjustments. Working increasingly with silence—resisting the urge to guide and allowing clients extended periods of internal work without verbal intervention—revealed how much reorganization could unfold within held space. The most significant element was trusting the field itself: not techniques or frameworks, but the intelligence that emerges when space is genuinely held.

Grounded fluidity offers both framework and developmental direction for

transpersonal practitioners working with identity transitions. When the container holds steady, and responsiveness flows, clients can explore threshold questions in ways that feel genuine, embodied, and self-directed.

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Trained in transpersonal coaching psychology and psychedelic-assisted therapy, Elina draws on somatic, imaginal and nature-based approaches. Her work spans psychedelic preparation, facilitation and integration, alongside major life, identity and leadership transitions.

She is co-founder of Nua Silta, offering psychedelic retreats in the Netherlands and training in facilitation of psychedelic experiences. Her experience in psychosocial and end-of-life contexts informs her work with people navigating uncertainty and profound change.

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The Introduction of a Transpersonal Coaching Model to the Treatment of Bipolar Affective Disorder

Jeff Katzman, M.D.

Abstract

This case study explores the application of a transpersonal coaching model as an adjunct to conventional psychiatric treatment in an individual diagnosed with Bipolar Affective Disorder Type I. While evidence-based psychotherapies and pharmacological interventions are essential for symptom stabilization, they may inadvertently contribute to a constricted sense of identity, in which the individual becomes defined by their diagnosis. This paper examines how transpersonal coaching—grounded in the practice of “holding space,” open awareness, integral practice and collaborative meaning-making—can support the re-emergence of selfhood, creativity, and a sense of connection beyond pathology. This case highlights the potential of transpersonal coaching to complement psychiatric care by restoring meaning, supporting spiritual emergence, and expanding the frame through which psychological distress is understood. It suggests that, when held within a grounded and collaborative container, transpersonal approaches can foster healing that extends beyond symptom reduction toward human flourishing.

Keywords: transpersonal coaching, spirituality, mood disorder, bipolar, open awareness

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Introduction

The development of evidence-based psychotherapies has brought important empirical rigor to mental health treatment. In the treatment of bipolar affective disorder, evidence supports the use of several psychotherapeutic approaches alongside pharmacotherapy, including psychoeducation, interpersonal and social rhythm therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and family-focused treatment (Novick & Swartz, 2019). Yet an emphasis on diagnosis, symptom recognition, and prevention of recurrence can also create a challenge: patients may come to understand a broad range of emotional and internal experiences primarily through the lens of illness. In doing so, aspects of personal identity, creativity, spirituality, and meaning may receive less attention.

Psychotherapy research has also demonstrated that outcomes depend not only on the specific treatment model employed, but on common relational factors, including empathy, the therapeutic alliance, collaboration, and agreement on therapeutic goals (Cuijpers et al., 2019). These relational elements have parallels in effective coaching relationships. In describing a transpersonal coaching approach, Dangeli (2019) uses the concept of “holding space” to characterize a relationship involving resonance and rapport, a participatory vision between client and coach, mindful awareness, an intentional attitude of acceptance and loving-kindness, and encouragement of open awareness beyond the “tunnel vision” that may bring an individual to seek assistance (p. 82).

For individuals with serious mental illness, such an approach may offer a way to explore dimensions of experience that can be difficult to accommodate within a predominantly symptom-focused framework, while maintaining appropriate attention to illness management and risk. This brief report describes the integration of a transpersonal coaching model with evidence-based psychiatric treatment for a patient with bipolar affective

disorder, with particular attention to the recovery of creativity, spirituality, personal meaning, and a sense of self beyond diagnosis.

Method

The case involves an attorney and writer with a passion for creative writing and jazz improvisation living in the Northeastern United States. He had a decades-long history of a diagnosis of Bipolar Affective Disorder Type I, involving multiple psychiatric hospitalizations, depression requiring electroconvulsive therapy, and manic episodes with hallucinations, racing thoughts, rapid and tangential speech, feelings of expansive mood, and voluminous nonsensical writing. He also had a history of nonsensical verbal eruptions in the courtroom and, at one point, speaking nonsensically while defending a case, amidst the beginning of a manic episode. These symptoms were ultimately managed successfully with mood-stabilising medications, though he continued with periods of insomnia and a growing internal sense of emptiness. Experiences of joy and happiness were assumed by the patient and care team as imminent mania, and any low mood as the onset of a potentially catastrophic depression. He had lost contact with his own sense of selfhood and was no longer the protagonist in his own life experience – he had become bipolar disorder. He actively participated in the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and other support groups and learned the importance of regularly taking his medications, though he had a lurking sense of dread that he no longer could feel creative in his life, with a general loss of a sense of life meaning. He had developed a “tunnel vision” (Dengali, 2019, p. 12) around his diagnosis – it was responsible for all experiences, and it was dangerous to think otherwise. Critically, he could no longer find the inspiration to write – a central component of his identity.

Early psychotherapy sessions involved traditional, evidence-based treatment, in conjunction with his psychopharmacologist. This included applications of psychoeducation, social rhythm therapy, and interpersonal and family approaches with a focus on the practicalities of life, establishing a routine, and communication strategies necessary in a successful intimate relationship. Additionally, the patient desired to discuss current stresses of parental illness against developmental themes of lack of attunement and a historical fear of feelings, particularly anger, as unregulated rage between his parents often led to difficult memories. Sessions were balanced between this understanding and the development of a self-care plan including walks around his neighborhood and attention to organizational tasks

that he felt good about completing each day. (This began as a component of interpersonal social rhythm therapy, though later became a component of integral practice). Through our meetings, humor between us developed, a product of our therapeutic alliance, particularly when sharing our feelings about folding laundry. This humor spread to discussions of the dread of other menial tasks, but the necessity of addressing them each day for structure.

After a year of working together, the patient let me know that he wanted to share an experience that he had never disclosed. He described a time following college, when working in a first law firm and far from home, in which he was quite homesick for his family. He recalled walking through a forested path in a public park, with a subtle awareness for the first time that he was connected to all things. Though I had a background concern that his current description might represent the reemergence of mania - perhaps empathic to his own concerns through the process of holding space - his discussion was thoughtful and not accompanied by any other manic symptoms. He explained that from time to time, this experience recurred. It was happening again lately, in which his walks through his neighborhood led to a sense of connection with the river and trees around him. He himself was concerned that this was an indication of further mania, yet he had no other signs – he was sleeping well, his thoughts logical and goal-directed, speech at a regular rate, no impulsivity or flight of ideas or risk-taking behavior – only a growing sense of connection to something greater beyond himself. With some sense of trepidation, I asked him to describe the sense further. He spoke of feeling calm and at peace, with a simultaneous return to the value of prayer and joy in listening to jazz. He also had an inspiration for a short story that he felt good about. He furthermore described returning to church each week as calming. He felt he was tapping into something beyond himself, which he experienced as different than mania.

While themes of connection beyond oneself in conjunction with religious ideas might be considered potential manic ideas, the patient was doing well without other symptoms of bipolarity. I had concerns as a psychiatrist to explore these themes in a patient with a history of manic depression, though I felt that neglecting his experience was more problematic with his initial presentation of inner deadness. We agreed to continue to focus on his experience of connection through a transpersonal coaching model, in conjunction with dream work. He was now recalling these for the first time in many years and wanted to discuss them. We moved from the frame of evidence-based psychotherapy and pharmacological stabilization, and I explicitly introduced a transpersonal coaching framework to the patient, grounded in

principles described by Dangelis (2019), particularly the practice of “holding space” and the cultivation of Open Awareness (OA).

This transpersonal coaching approach emphasizes development across multiple domains of experience—cognitive, emotional, somatic, relational, and spiritual. Much of this we had been doing when considering interpersonal social rhythm therapy in conjunction with a supportive holding alliance. Though in practice, this was much more, involving the intentional introduction of integral practices, understood as structured, repeatable activities supporting awareness and integration across multiple personal capacities. The coaching agreement was collaborative and transparent. Sessions occurred weekly (45–60 minutes), with flexibility based on clinical need. The coaching stance differed from prior therapeutic work in that it emphasized: curiosity over education and skills training, co-created meaning rather than formulation led by me, and ultimately a process of relational attunement and “holding space” for whatever the patient considered most important. This work was deepened through the introduction of Open Awareness imagery at the start of many sessions.

Results

As we began a program of integral practice, we began with a few sessions of Open Awareness with meditative experiences focused on connection. He felt these as calming and similar to the experience he had in college when walking through the park. He particularly felt the Jumi tree breathing experience (Dangelis, 2019, p 54) facilitated a sense of groundedness while simultaneously eliciting the experience of expansion, now with a sense of calm, flow, and connection to others. Simultaneously, we paid attention to dreams - he was quite excited about working through these. We both felt a rekindling of his creative capacities, beyond any particular dream that we discussed, as we together were able to identify a trajectory of the emergence of a whole person, capable of helping others. “Holding space” to think creatively together about these dreams was enlivening for both of us.

Various themes emerged in dream work that included:

- a history of sacrificing his own needs for those of others, with a turn in awareness for a need and capacity to advocate for himself with an attention to self-healing
- a de-idealization of prior icons who he knew, worked with, and looked up to, and a sense of himself as a calm and strong individual equal to their stature

- the feelings of anger, loving kindness, grief, and joy as somatically experienced affects, represented in dreams, without a fear of the experiences
- the capacity to heal others through interpersonal experiences.

An example of a recent dream revealed him as a competent healer. “I was in my high school with an old teacher. He was someone who used to frighten me, as his expectations were high and he would often erupt at the class unexpectedly. But he was tired now, looking down at his desk. I offered him my hand, and he seemed to be energized, and able to teach again.”

We considered this dream from multiple perspectives, including his growing competence and sense of his own ability to help others; his own bipolarity and “irritable eruptions” waning through the development of a sense of calm; a notion that he is as valued as those he looked up to with a growing sense of self-esteem, and his general sense that “I don’t think I need to be so scared of people anymore - it’s like I’m a grown-up now.” Ultimately, he shared a sense that he was integrating feelings that he had always considered part of his disease.

The patient began to write short stories at regularly scheduled times each morning, and through this, rekindled a sense of purpose in his life. His speech continued at a regular rate, his thoughts not tangential, his sleep good – as we slowly unfolded a spirit that was ready to come alive again and not be feared. It emerged without other symptoms of mania as he learned not to fear himself.

The patient has now completed a book of short stories with a publishing contract in hand. He has successfully begun to lead writing workshops for high school students and has begun to volunteer his time to a school for legal consultation. Through this, he began to say – “I think maybe the bipolar disorder is gone.” I reminded him of the danger of this thought, and that he was managing the bipolarity well, and that what was emerging was his sense of himself as a person – his sense of aliveness and connection- and his recognition of how different this was than mania. At the same time, his medications and self-care were keeping the disease process at bay.

Discussion

This case underscores the importance of “holding space” for a client and demonstrates the role that empathy and collaboration have in healing. There are many areas for

consideration here: an individual with bipolar affective disorder experiences human emotions including love, kindness, creativity, as well as anger connected to boundaries and self-protection, and these can easily become understood as expansive or irritable mania without some discernment. It is critical to engage with curiosity about the experiences of a client, rather than immediately attributing them to a major mood disorder. The process of integral practice and curiosity about transpersonal experiences can be applied with an ongoing emphasis on maintaining routine and structure in life, particularly with an individual at risk for recurrence of a major mood disorder. In this example, it is quite possible that the support of the alliance, attention to components of integral practice and connection with internal meaning have helped to prevent illness, in conjunction with ongoing psychopharmacology, though this would be conjecture based on a single case. Additionally, Open Awareness is a tool that facilitates a sense of connection and grounding that is different from the expansiveness of mania, and careful discussion of this can help to delineate this for a patient. It is critical that any healing process takes place with the view of a patient as possessing human potential – “an intentional attitude of acceptance and loving kindness (Dangeli, 2019, p. 82).” The current emphasis on medication and evidence-based psychotherapies runs the risk of exacerbating a tunnel vision for a patient – leading them to believe they are the disease process, losing any sense of creative capacities. Medication has been life-saving for this patient, though I am tempted to think in moments that with the support of his unfolding spirit and affective awareness – perhaps he may not need it one day. We joke together about that and always conclude, “let’s not find out.” The risk of this idea is great and unnecessary at this moment and potentially represents my own “tunnel vision” rather than embracing multiple contributions to the healing process.

Conclusion

Transpersonal coaching models can be extremely useful with clients with complex psychiatric diagnoses, particularly when integrated sensitively into a treatment plan alongside other mental health professionals. They may well provide additional insight into the nature of the presentation beyond a DSM diagnosis. My growing comfort in discussing spirituality and transpersonal ideas allowed me to venture into this territory with this patient. Training in psychiatry generally neglects discussions of transpersonal ideas, somatic awareness, or the importance of connecting with a human being collaboratively to hold space. Rather,

psychiatric training often employs a simple medical model of care, and a patient's sense of their own humanity can be lost through the treatment of a disease. I believe that, in many ways, I have helped this patient through a spiritual crisis, through support in venturing beyond the edges of traditional psychiatric care. I also know that this patient has helped me connect to the joy, creativity, and complexity of my own profession as we have engaged in the unfolding of his spirit beyond what diagnostic systems may have created.

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Modelling Ventral Vagal Safety using Polyvagal-informed Somatic Work in Transpersonal Coaching (the PVSTC approach)

Rachael Baker-Searle, PhD

Abstract

This report considers the impact of modelling ventral vagal safety using polyvagal-informed somatic work in transpersonal coaching (PVSTC approach). The approach was assessed qualitatively using client feedback and quantitatively via a novel instrument (Somatic, Embodiment, Empathy, Compassion, Connection in Open Awareness Scale [SEECCOA]). Subjective feedback and SEECCOA data suggest the PVSTC approach may improve somatic awareness, stress responses, awareness of Self and the transpersonal realms, and connection to self and others. Clients appeared more able to regulate their nervous systems and to have experienced transformation regarding their self-concept and approach to issues. Future research exploring modification of the SEECCOA may provide a way to measure transpersonal coaching outcomes, adding to the robustness of the field. The PVSTC approach appears to be a promising model in transpersonal coaching, representing an area for further study.

Keywords: polyvagal, somatic, nervous system, transpersonal coaching, trauma

Recommended citation

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Introduction

Transpersonal coaching (TC) is a holistic, transformative approach that engages expanded states of consciousness, spiritual and existential meaning-making, and exploration of the authentic Self beyond egoic identification (Dängeli, 2022; De Vitto, 2025; Fernandez Borsot, 2024). Expanded states of consciousness in TC are achieved through practices such as Open Awareness (Dängeli & Geldenhuys, 2018). Trauma-related issues may arise during coaching, and rather than revivifying past events, trauma-informed TC explores associated emotional, somatic, and behavioural patterns manifesting in the present (Geldenhuys, 2024).

Clients' patterns and stories are shaped by their autonomic nervous system (ANS). The ANS continually assesses internal states, others, and the environment for safety or threat (neuroception), and initiates adaptive somatic responses towards safety before conscious meaning-making occurs (Dana, 2018). Polyvagal theory suggests perceived threat activates sympathetic mobilization or dorsal vagal collapse, whereas a neuroception of safety engages the ventral vagal system (Dana, 2018). Pivotal to this process is the insular cortex, which integrates and compares interoceptive signals with memories, experiences, and fears (Lienhard et al., 2021). Present stimuli may be unconsciously associated with past experience, contributing to over-identification with egoic parts of the self and trigger-fixation (tunnel awareness), reinforcing repetitive patterns (Dängeli, 2022; De Vitto, 2025). Conscious observation and engagement with ANS and somatic responses may influence patterns in neuroception. As the ANS is relational and experience-dependent, an empathic coach embodying ventral vagal safety (VVS) can support co-regulation and facilitate conditions for client transformation (Dana, 2018).

This study explores the impact of modelling VVS through polyvagal-informed somatic work in TC (herein called the PVSTC approach). The PVSTC approach blends polyvagal theory, somatic work and transpersonal coaching psychology into a single framework. It is based on the hypothesis that tunnel awareness may be associated with sympathetic and dorsal vagus looping, low-energy limiting reorientation to VVS, and reduced fidelity of interoceptive information reaching the insular cortex (Dana, 2018; Dängeli, 2022; Lienhard et al., 2021; Miserandino, 2003). The PVSTC approach therefore combines explicit

ANS regulation and energy accounting with expanded awareness to support reorientation to VVS and clients' openness to self-exploration, integration, and new perspectives.

Method

Participants

Seven female clients (n=7; different nationalities; aged 36-64), recruited via word-of-mouth, social media, and the Alef Trust, were coached from October-December 2025 (33 sessions, 1.5 hours/session; 3 sessions [n=1]; 5 sessions [n=6]; online [n=5], face-to-face [n=2]).

Procedure

Sessions followed the PVSTC approach (Appendix A). I adhered to PVSTC principles and a daily practice including self-reflection, parts work, meditation, nervous system regulation, and Dru yoga and/or Jumi (Dängeli, 2021; Dru Yoga International, n.d.; Plett, 2020; Rogers, 1957; Schwartz, 2023). Pre-session, an Open Awareness/PRESENCE-based practice was conducted for ≥ 15 minutes (Geller, 2020). During sessions, peripheral awareness and the felt-sense were used to track verbal and non-verbal cues (e.g. gestures, breathing, prosody, energy changes). Depending on emerging ANS states, I discerned whether to reflect non-verbal cues, offer pendulation/titration for co-regulation, or facilitate client-led somatic resource creation (Dana, 2018; Levine, 2023).

Data analysis

The “Somatic, Embodiment, Empathy, Compassion, Connection in Open Awareness Scale” (SEECCOA) was developed to assess the PVSTC approach (Appendix B). Administered at sessions 1, 3 and 5, the SEECCOA used a 5-point Likert scale across four domains (Table 1) and was informed by TCP, polyvagal and somatic theory; The Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness; and the Embodied Mindfulness questionnaire (Dana, 2018; Dängeli, 2022; Khoury et al., 2023; Mehling et al., 2018). Mean scores and standard deviations for clients completing 5 sessions (n=6) were presented graphically using Microsoft Excel™. Written feedback was obtained from all clients and analysed for themes (n=7).

Table 1: Relevance of domains

Domain	Relevance
A. Somatic Awareness	Interoception, neuroception – internal landscape awareness, ANS cues
B. Body-mind Regulation	Stress response – release/engagement of vagal brake (Dana, 2018)
C. Embodiment and Open awareness	Awareness of Self/transpersonal realms
D. Connection, Empathy & Compassion	Connection with others, sense of self in the world (VVS - social engagement system activated) (Dana, 2018)

Ethical considerations

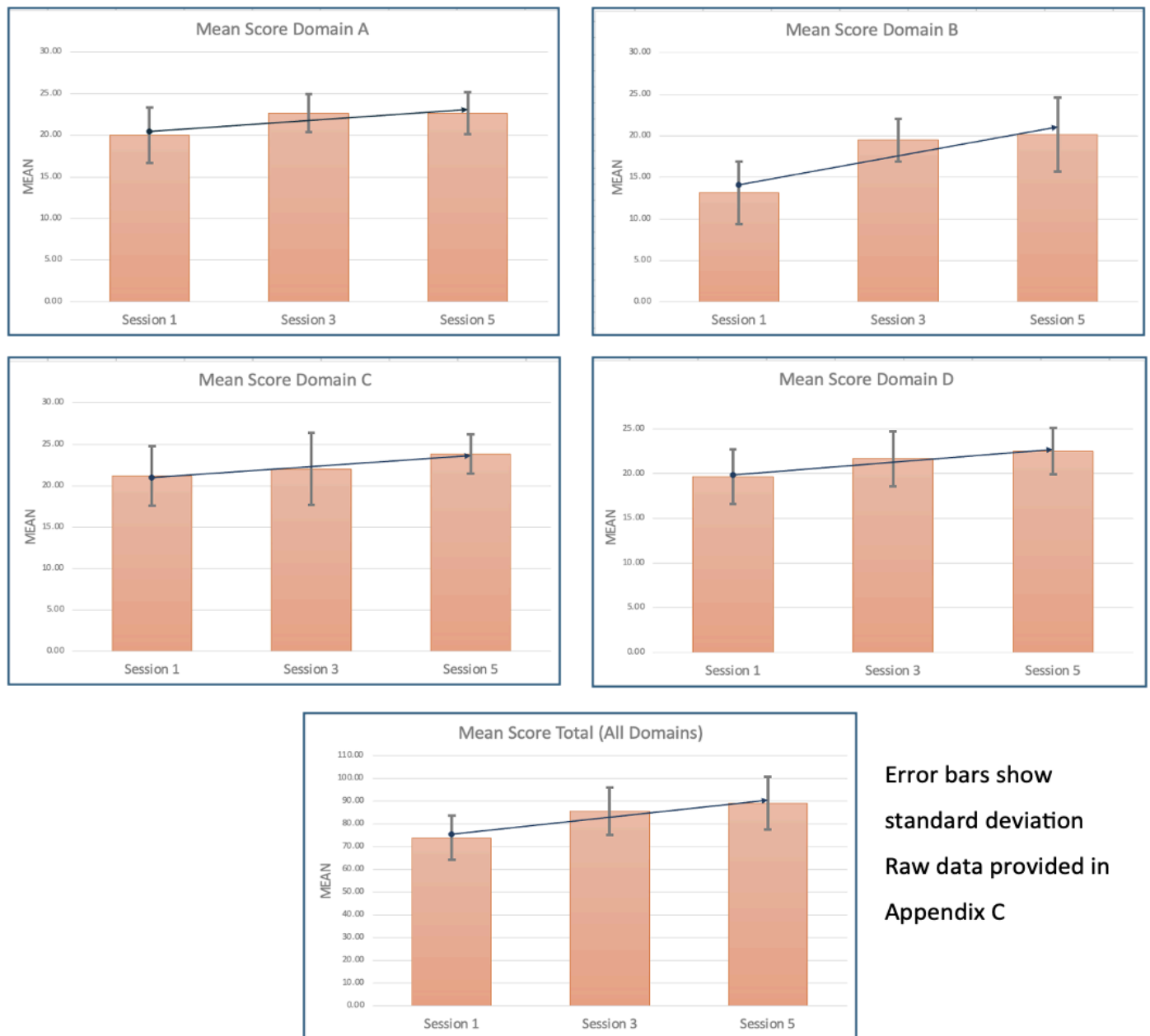
All clients provided informed consent covering confidentiality, ethics, questionnaire use, and anonymised audio recordings or AI-generated summaries (deleted post-session). Clients could withdraw consent at any time.

As the coach's regulated presence is key to the PVSTC approach, avoiding co-dependence and emphasising clients' agency is important. I engaged in "internal supervision" during sessions to remain client-led, non-directive, and ethically grounded, with all interventions offered invitationally (Casement, 2014).

Results

SEECCOA results

SEECCOA results (Figure 1) showed an overall upward trend across Total/All domains from sessions 1-5. All individual domains increased from sessions 1-3. Domains B: Body–Mind Regulation, C: Embodiment and Open Awareness, and D: Connection, Empathy and Compassion continued to increase from sessions 3-5, while A: Somatic Awareness remained stable.

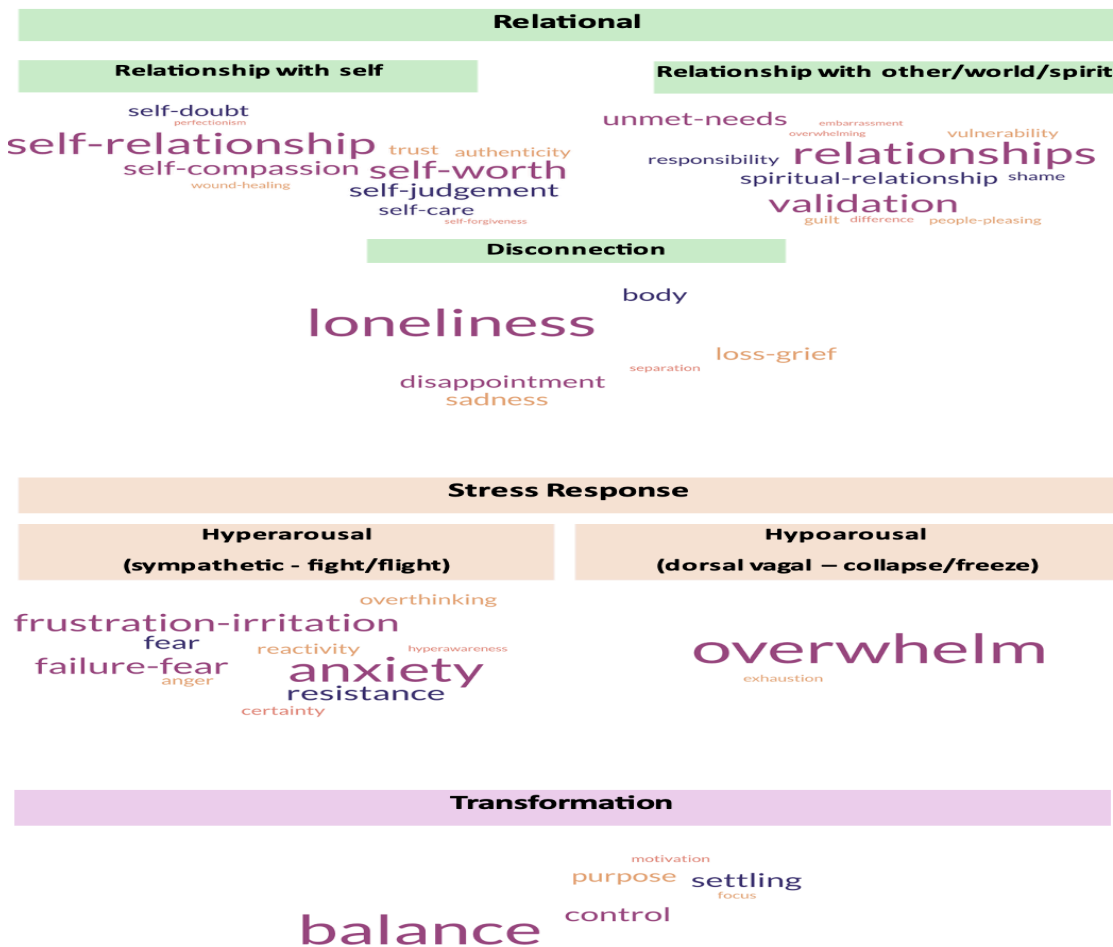
Figure 1: SEECCOA Domain Scores

Error bars show
standard deviation
Raw data provided in
Appendix C

Themes

Common themes were relational (particularly self-worth, relationship with self/others, loneliness), stress (primarily anxiety, frustration/irritation, overwhelm), and transformation-related (balance) (Figure 2).

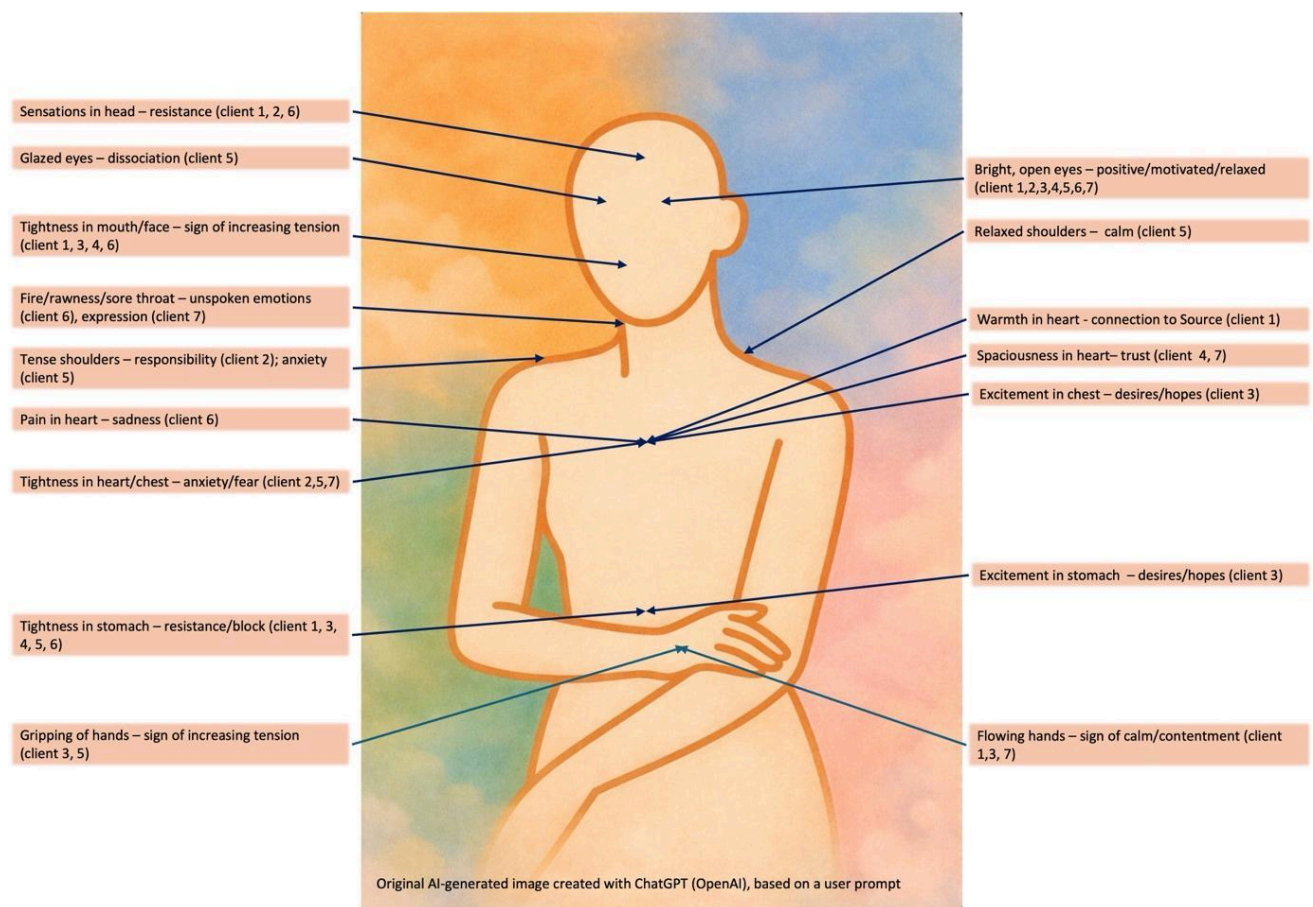
Figure 2: Weighted Word Cloud of Themes



Somatic Patterns

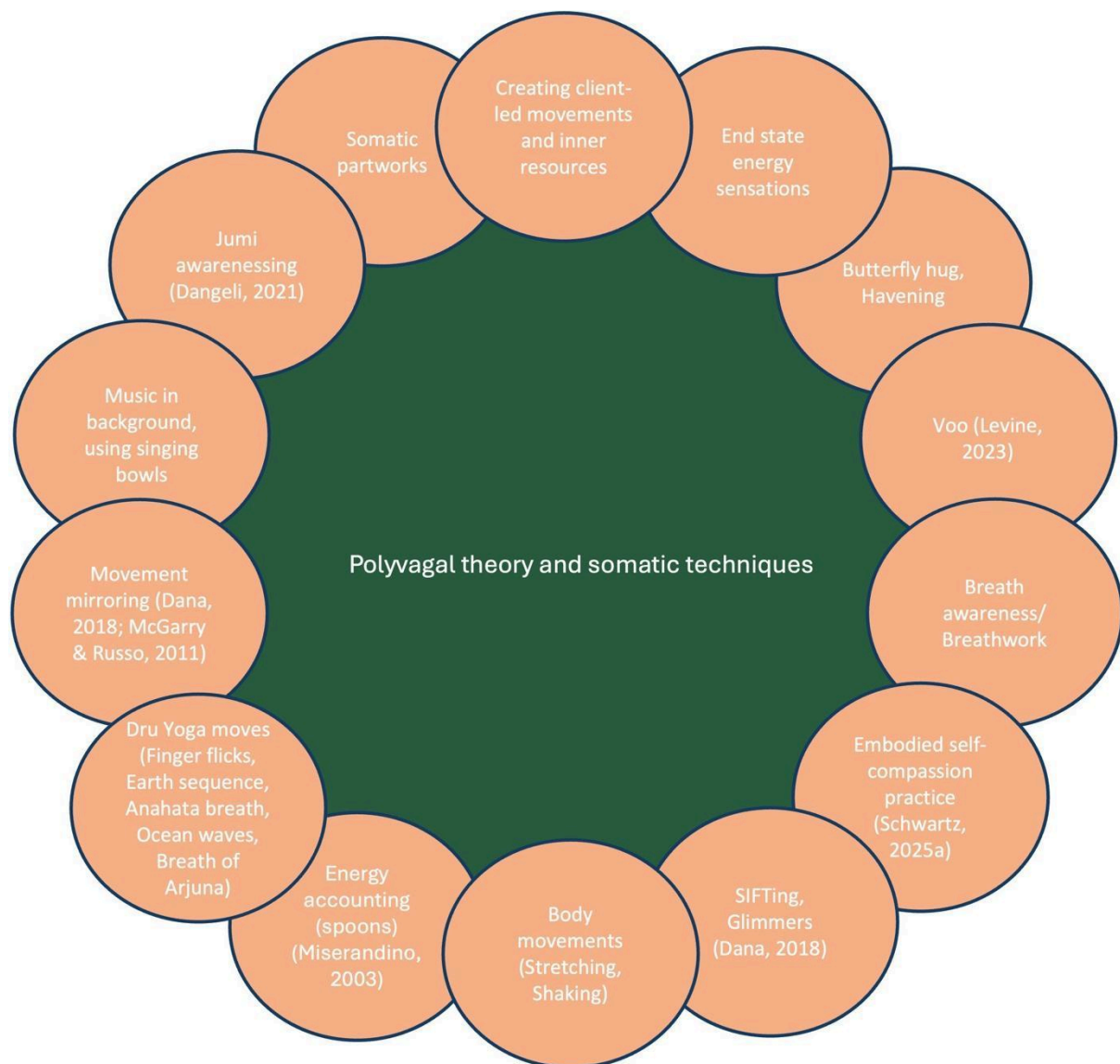
Consistent somatic patterns emerged across clients (Figure 3). Anxiety and relational fear were commonly associated with chest and heart sensations (e.g., tightness, heaviness, containment). Decision-making and internal resistance often presented as stomach sensations, suggesting perceived threat to the self-concept activating protective parts (which eased with breathwork and seeking parts' permission) (Rogers, 1959; Schwartz, 2023). Uncertainty and overthinking were associated with head-based sensations (e.g., pressure, heaviness). Somatic patterns broadly aligned with Seigel's anatomic location of energy activation and flow (ALEAF) associated with certain personality patterns: Gut - Agency, Heart/Chest - Bonding, and Head – Certainty (Seigel, 2025).

Figure 3: Somatic patterns



Attending to clients' non-verbal cues, including somatic patterns and unconscious gestures, informed my use of pendulation/titration and inner resource creation (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Polyvagal theory and somatic techniques



Examples of PVSTC approach

In a session with Client 5, exploring identity with the transpersonal coaching model (TCM), a younger part emerged (Dängeli, 2022). I experienced a felt sense of heaviness and dreaminess and noticed Client 5 looked distant, with a flat vocal tone. I suspected a dissociating part was emerging to protect the more vulnerable, younger part – suggesting a possible hypoarousal/dorsal vagal response (Dana, 2018; Schwartz, 2023). To avoid revivifying past trauma, somatic co-regulation was introduced using the butterfly hug/shaking arms to support reorientation towards VVS (Dana, 2018; Seigel, 2025). To build a triad of trust between myself, the dissociating part, and the client's Self, choice was offered regarding

session direction (parts work continuation, movement/breathwork, or conversational use of TCM cards) (Dängeli, 2022). Client 5 selected the TCM cards, and exploration around motivation and self-worth proceeded without reactivating dissociation. Over time, establishing trust with “protector parts” allowed Client 5 to compassionately engage with their younger part (Schwartz, 2023). Client 5 built self-worth by tapping into the sensations, images, feelings and thoughts (SIFTing) around a time they felt worthy and loved, which informed parts-based inquiry into present needs (Dana, 2018). This helped Client 5 to become more positive and develop self-compassion for parts that felt unworthy and demotivated (Figure 6, Figure 8).

Energy accounting homework involved them feeling into what gave or removed energy, enabling them to plan ways to build balance around potentially draining situations (Miserandino, 2003). Sessions concluded with Dru Yoga to support grounding and integration (Dru Yoga International, n.d.). Dru Yoga has roots in Hatha yoga and includes traditional yoga poses (asanas) performed as flowing sequences with soft joints, pranayama (breath-work), mudras (gestures), affirmations, visualisations, and energy block release (EBR) sequences to ease physical, emotional, and mental tension. Dru yoga also focuses on movements originating from the spine, including spinal waves and twists, and balancing the chakras (energy centres of the body). Sessions with Client 5 included sequences such as heart chakra-based EBR3, presence-based EBR2, Earth Sequence, and Tree of Transformation, which include affirmations, mudras, and breath-focus.

In sessions with Client 3, opportunities to use their gestures to create inner resources occurred. For Client 3, clenched fists when engaging with shame-related parts indicated hyperarousal/sympathetic activation (Dana, 2018; Seigel, 2025). In contrast, side-stretched arms were associated with relaxation. I invited them to use these contrasting gestures to explore these states. A personalised somatic “power move” was co-created (arms pulling down with fists, extending sideways, releasing palms) and used for pendulation/titration. Over sessions, Client 3’s shame transformed into self-compassion, revealing the highest intention for the shame-related part was seeking connection (Figure 6, Figure 8).

Further somatic resources were created through attending to clients’ descriptions of safety and comfort. Client 4 consistently used kinaesthetic language and imagery involving warm, soft, textures (e.g., fluffy sheep, soft mattresses visualised during Open Awareness). Reflecting this imagery revealed their tactile preference. We explored this to co-create a

resource for managing frustration, which involved stroking fluffy fabrics (e.g. tea towels or the inside of a sweater) or visualising fluffy sheep. Client 4 found this approach effective in managing work-related stress.

Somatic work using end-state energy associated with a goal, rather than the goal itself, helped clients identify next steps (Dängeli, 2014). Client 4 focused on the felt-sense of achievement, reporting “rooster-like” qualities – proud, strong and upright. Exaggerating these movements together evoked a sense of coming alive, which Client 4 described as like a “machine that was dormant”. They recognised they had withdrawn and lost confidence and now wanted to feel empowered and seen. Client 4 recognised tuning into their felt sense could guide their next steps. They reflected the following about the coaching approach – “You really pick up on little signs, facial expression, tone of voice, then you act upon it – the body aspect is so important – you seem to read me like a book, you have the ability to really understand” – suggesting they felt empathically seen and heard.

Subjective feedback

After coaching, all clients reported feelings of safety (Figure 5), more compassion and connection to self/others (Figure 6), deeper/spiritual connection (Figure 7), and transformation (Figure 8). Clients described heightened bodily awareness; for example, Client 5 noticed how they felt “crammed” inside their body when anxious. Clients reported being calmer/more at ease – Client 4 said “[I’m] much more positive and calmer about my future”; Client 3 reflected, “My nervous system is beginning to reach a more natural rhythm”. Clients described being able to soothe their nervous system in their everyday life with techniques used in sessions, such as breathwork, energy accounting (Miserandino, 2003), recognising triggers/glimmers (Dana, 2018), and end-state energy/somatic resources.

Figure 5: Experiences of safety

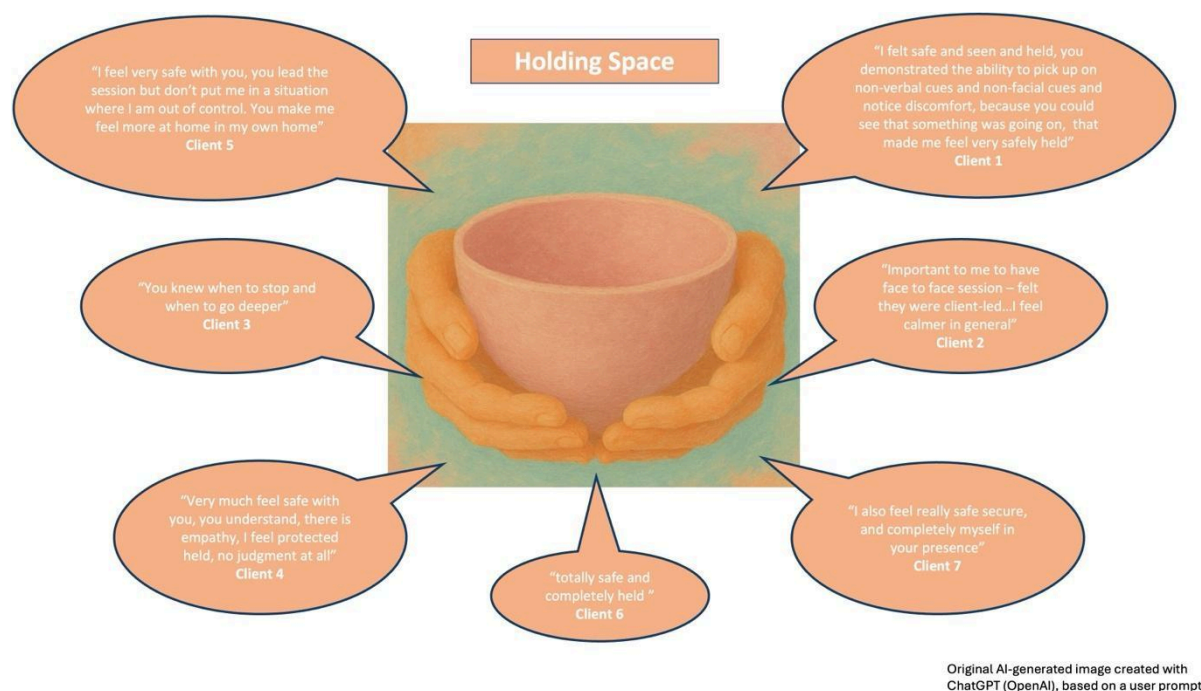


Figure 6: Experiences of compassion and connection

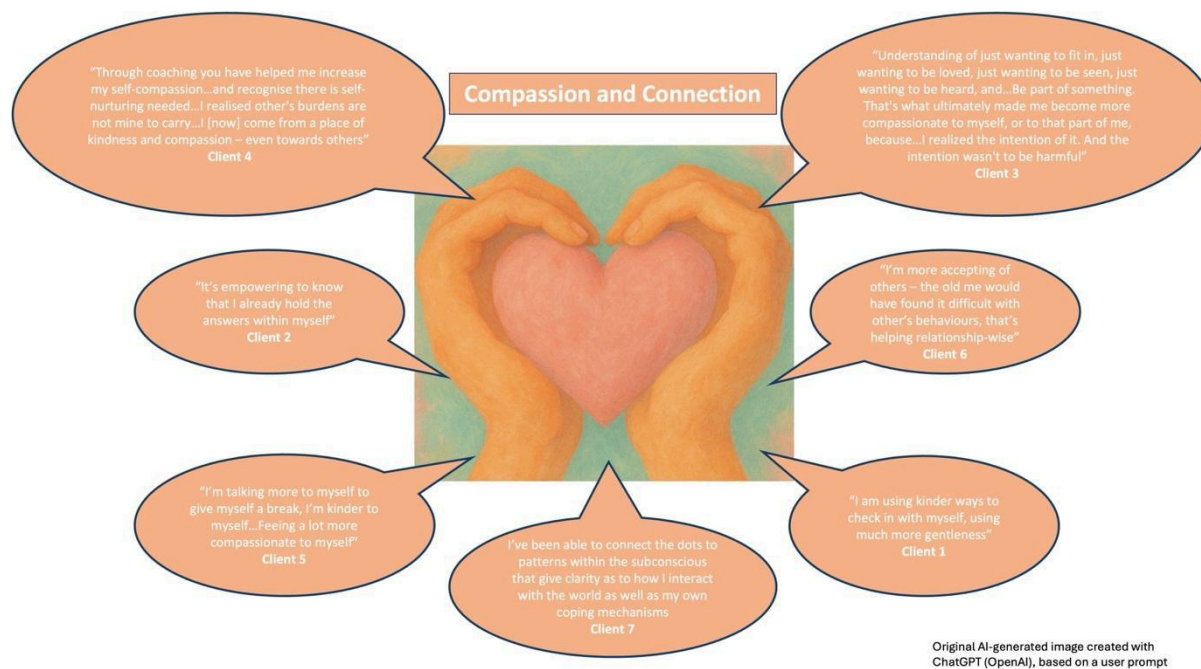


Figure 7: Deeper/Spiritual connection

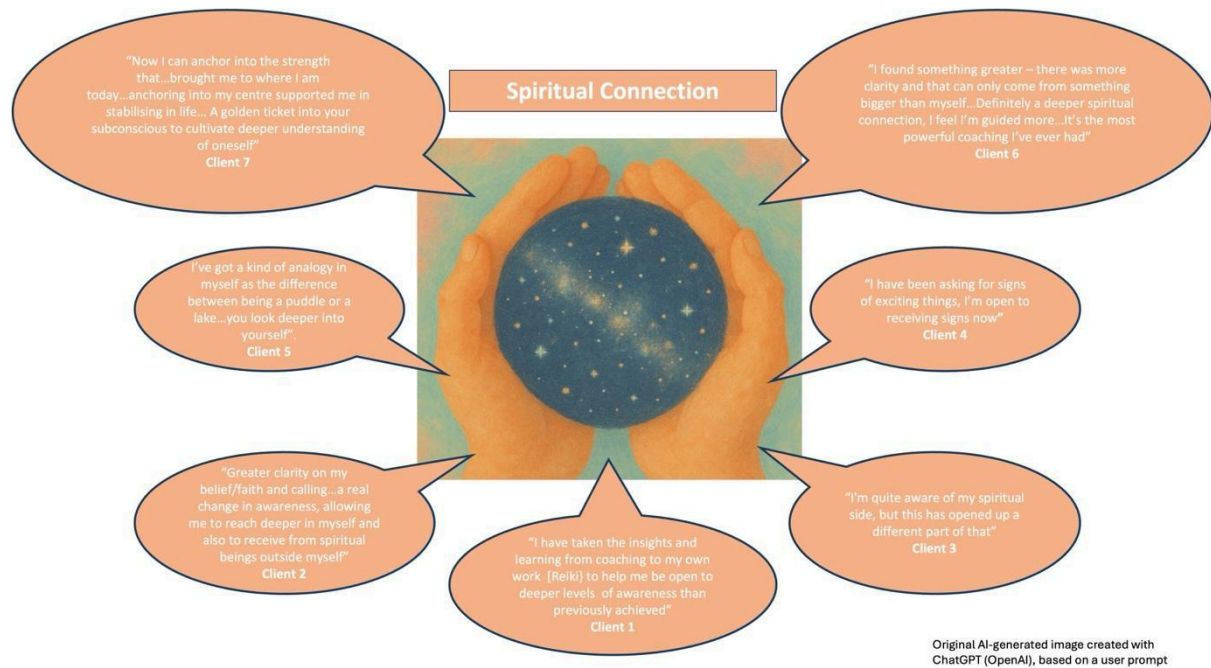
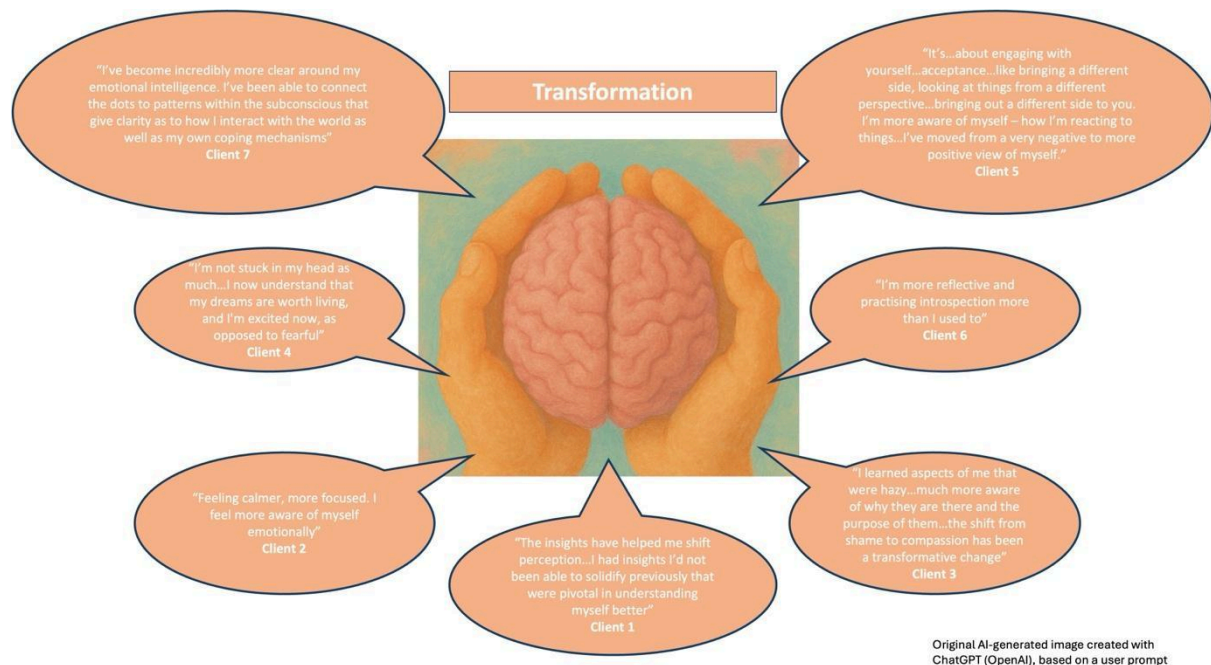


Figure 8: Transformation



Discussion

This study explored the modelling of VVS using polyvagal-informed somatic work in TC (PVSTC approach). SEECCOA results suggest the PVSTC approach may improve somatic awareness, stress responses, awareness of Self and transpersonal realms, and connection to self and others. However, findings are exploratory as the study was inadequately powered to show statistical significance due to the small sample size. Qualitative feedback indicated the SEECCOA Likert scale lacked sensitivity to capture changes during coaching (as some clients reported maximum scores at baseline). A sliding scale would therefore be more appropriate. Additional limitations include potential response bias (SEECCO was completed in-person), limited generalisability (sample was only women ≥ 35 years old), and inability to attribute outcomes specifically to the PVSTC approach (absence of comparative groups). Future research could address these limitations by including larger, more diverse samples, anonymous data collection, and comparative groups.

Polyvagal theory suggests acknowledging repetitive thoughts and states, interrupting them, and refocusing on connection and safety can facilitate change (Schwartz, 2025). This is relevant to TC as techniques such as Open Awareness expand awareness and help clients become more mindful of internal states – therefore creating the opportunity to interrupt and change these states (Dängeli, 2022). Key to this process of change is the fidelity of information received by the insular cortex – essential for threat recognition and determining predictability (Lienhard et al., 2021). The ability to interpret interoceptive information is positively associated with resilience (Lienhard et al., 2021). The PVSTC approach appears to expand awareness by engaging the whole self (sensory, cognitive, emotional, imaginal and perspectival), supporting recognition and interruption of tunnel awareness. Furthermore, movements involving pushing/pulling (e.g., Client 3’s “power move”) are thought to support completion of previously inhibited defensive trauma responses (Levine, 2010). Through these mechanisms, the PVSTC approach may improve the fidelity of interoceptive information received by the insular cortex - helping clients respond beyond limiting patterns, although further study is required for validation. From a metaphorical and neuroscientific perspective, areas for future research could include whether the PVSTC approach supports balance between right-hemisphere-associated interoceptive, non-verbal, relational, and emotion-regulatory processes and left-hemisphere language-based, logical, and

pattern-focused processes, thereby facilitating integration and emergence of new perspectives (Edwards, 1992; Lienhard et al., 2021; Schore, 2009).

During this study, the PVSTC approach appeared to naturally create Rogerian core conditions (empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard) and an “I-Thou” relational quality (Buber, 1937; Clarkson, 2003; Rogers, 2004). I feel this supported autonomic and somatic resonance, where my own embodied Self and the embodied Self of the client connected, allowing the client to feel safe, seen and heard (as shown in qualitative feedback) (Dana, 2018; Levine, 2010, 2023; McConnell, 2012). As resonance grew, somatic techniques for resource building or co-regulation emerged organically. Empathy and emotional understanding increased through movement mirroring (McGarry & Russo, 2011). Attending to clients' non-verbal cues and reflecting and joining in with clients' gestures helped me gain a deeper understanding of their autonomic experience, allowing me to more effectively use pendulation/titration and personalised resources (Dana, 2018; Levine, 2010, 2023).

Clients often begin coaching in tunnel awareness, seeing a part as their whole self; therefore, perhaps the best way to new meaning is by exploring that whole self (Dängeli, 2022; Rogers, 2004). Parts present themselves through our narratives, bodies, mannerisms, prosody, facial expressions and subtle energy shifts – a sudden frisson or stillness in the air. The PVSTC approach appeared to facilitate trust with ‘protector parts – enabling the conditions for clients to explore parts’ roles in their present issues and work towards their coaching aims without revivifying past trauma (De Vitto, 2025; Levine, 2010; Schwartz, 2023). The PVSTC approach seems to model VVS, allowing clients to know themselves and their parts more fully – giving them an opportunity to transform.

Conclusion

This study suggests that modelling ventral vagal safety through the PVSTC approach may create physiological, relational, and transpersonal conditions necessary for awareness and transformation to emerge safely without re-traumatisation. Future research testing and modifying the SEECCOA may provide a way to measure transpersonal coaching outcomes, adding to the robustness of the field. While the precise mechanism of the PVSTC approach

requires validation, it offers a promising model in transpersonal coaching, representing an area for further study.

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Appendix A: The polyvagal-informed somatic work in transpersonal coaching approach (PVSTC)

The PVSTC approach interweaves polyvagal theory, somatic work and transpersonal coaching psychology into a single conceptual framework, with an emphasis on somatic work. Central to the PVSTC approach is the coach's modelling of ventral vagal safety (VVS) and the tracking of somatic cues associated with the client's autonomic nervous system (ANS) states and emotions. Therefore, the PVSTC approach emphasises pre-session preparation and adherence to key principles inspired by Rogerian core conditions and Plett's concept of the coach as a "bowl" for clients' experiences (Plett, 2020; Rogers, 1957). The "bowl" represents holding the client's experience in a client-led, non-directive way, supported by the coach's presence, guiding principles, and ongoing supportive practice (Plett, 2020; Rogers, 1957). The PVSTC principles include witnessing, congruence, empathy, compassion, curiosity, understanding, exploration, being with/not directing, humbleness, respect, unconditional positive regard, non-judgement, and trust in the clients' self-actualising potential. Pre-session, the coach aims to establish a ventral vagal expanded state of awareness. This typically involves ≥ 15 minutes of preparation including Open Awareness (OA), somatic self-tracking, self-reflection and review of the PVSTC principles. Ongoing daily practices of conscious nervous system regulation, self-reflection, parts work, OA and embodiment (e.g. breathwork, meditation, yoga, Jumi, Tai Chi) are also recommended.

During sessions, the coach explicitly models VVS, which requires monitoring and maintaining their ANS state while tracking shifts in the client's ANS. Somatic cues guide the pacing of the work and inform when and how to invite transpersonal exploration, offer co-regulation, hold silence, share reflections, create somatic resources, or suggest movement. Between sessions, alongside self-identified coaching steps, clients are encouraged to engage in nervous system regulation practices, such as tracking bodily cues of safety, connection, or joy (glimmers) and look at energy accounting (Dana, 2018; Miserandino, 2003). This is to increase their awareness of nervous system states and early signs of overwhelm or triggering. While OA is introduced from the outset, early sessions may prioritise safety and nervous system regulation before deeper expanded awareness or parts work, particularly for clients with trauma histories. This approach establishes a foundation of safety and supports clients to regulate during transpersonal exploration, fostering trust with parts and the Self.

Appendix B: SEECCOA

The Somatic, Embodiment, Empathy, Compassion, Connection in Open Awareness Scale (SEECCOA)					
Domain A – Somatic Awareness					
1A	I am aware of bodily sensations	1	2	3	4 5
2A	I can easily locate areas of tension or ease in my body	1	2	3	4 5
3A	When I feel stressed, I feel it in my body before I think about it	1	2	3	4 5
4A	I can sense changes in my breathing, body posture and/or movements when my emotional state changes	1	2	3	4 5
5A	I recognise patterns of tension and/or tightness in my body as indicators of specific emotional states	1	2	3	4 5
Domain B – Body–Mind Regulation					
6B	I do not become reactive and can remain calm when emotionally triggered or stressed	1	2	3	4 5
7B	When experiencing challenges, I feel balanced/centred in my body, rather than “heady”/not in my body	1	2	3	4 5
8B	I can think clearly when emotionally triggered or stressed	1	2	3	4 5
9B	To restore calm when I feel tense, I usually use my breath or body posture	1	2	3	4 5
10B	I quickly return to a state of calm in my body and mind after stress	1	2	3	4 5
Domain C – Embodiment and Open Awareness					
11C	I am easily able to expand my awareness to include my whole body	1	2	3	4 5
12C	I am easily able to sense my own body as well as my external surroundings	1	2	3	4 5
13C	I feel a sense of spaciousness in my body and mind most of the time	1	2	3	4 5
14C	I often have moments where I feel connected to something greater than myself where I feel uplifted	1	2	3	4 5
15C	I am aware of a deeper Self or consciousness beyond my everyday persona	1	2	3	4 5
Domain D – Connection, Empathy and Compassion					
16D	I have self-compassion	1	2	3	4 5
17D	I feel connected to the world around me	1	2	3	4 5
18D	I feel empathy for others (deeply understand and feel another’s emotions)	1	2	3	4 5
19D	I feel compassion for others (desire to act and alleviate another’s suffering)	1	2	3	4 5
20D	I can be my authentic self in the world without masking	1	2	3	4 5
Rating	Meaning				
1	Strongly disagree				
2	Slightly disagree				
3	Neutral/Unsure				
4	Slightly agree				
5	Strongly agree				
Domain	Polyvagal / Transpersonal Relevance				
A. Somatic Awareness	Interoception, neuroception awareness of internal landscape and autonomic nervous system cues				
B. Body-mind Regulation	Response to stress - release and engagement of vagal brake (Dana, 2018)				
C. Embodiment and Open awareness	Awareness of Self and the transpersonal realms				
D. Connection, Empathy & Compassion	Connection with others and sense of self in the world (Ventral vagal safety - social engagement system activated) (Dana, 2018)				

Appendix C: Raw data

Session Domain	Client 1	Client 3	Client 4	Client 5	Client 6	Client 7	Mean	SD
1A	15	21	25	18	20	21	20.00	3.346640106
3A	23	24	25	21	19	24	22.67	2.250925735
5A	24	24	25	18	22	23	22.67	2.503331114
1B	14	15	13	6	14	17	13.17	3.763863264
3B	22	21	21	15	18	20	19.50	2.588435821
5B	22	21	25	12	19	22	20.17	4.44597196
1C	24	20	24	15	24	20	21.17	3.600925807
3C	24	20	25	14	25	24	22.00	4.335896678
5C	25	25	25	19	25	24	23.83	2.401388487
1D	20	20	25	18	19	16	19.67	3.011090611
3D	23	22	25	16	23	21	21.67	3.076794869
5D	25	23	25	18	22	22	22.50	2.588435821
All 1	73	76	87	57	77	74	74.00	9.715966241
All 1	92	87	96	66	85	89	85.83	10.45785191
All 1	96	93	100	67	88	91	89.17	11.61751551

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The Integrative Potential of Transpersonal Coaching Psychology in Spiritual Bypassing: An Exploratory Case Study

Sahaja Mascia Ellero

Abstract

Spiritual bypassing refers to the use of spiritual beliefs or practices to avoid unintegrated psychological material, with broader implications for everyday lived experience. While widely discussed in transpersonal and counselling literature, less attention has been given to how coaching may support awareness and integration of these patterns within spiritually oriented contexts. This qualitative exploratory study examined whether Transpersonal Coaching Psychology (TCP) may offer a helpful framework for recognising and addressing spiritual bypassing. Eight participants engaged in client-led, trauma-aware coaching sessions conducted online or face-to-face. Data were collected through post-intervention written reflections and a structured retrospective self-assessment questionnaire. Findings indicated shifts in how spirituality was integrated into everyday life, including increased emotional engagement and embodied regulation, reduced reliance on spiritual explanations to avoid discomfort, and greater psychological and relational integration. Overall, the study indicates that TCP may support the integrative engagement of spiritual experience with psychological and

relational dimensions of everyday life through embodied, relational, and client-led processes.

Keywords: spiritual bypassing, transpersonal coaching psychology, embodiment, open awareness, spiritual integration

Recommended citation

Mascia-Ellero, S. (2026). The integrative potential of transpersonal coaching psychology in spiritual bypassing: An exploratory case study. *The Transpersonal Coaching Journal*, 5, 76-94. <https://iactm.org/tcpj>

Introduction

Across spiritual traditions and within transpersonal psychology, spiritual experience is widely regarded as having transformative potential (Caplan et al., 2013). Within this perspective, healthy or mature spirituality is associated with psychological integration and relational depth, as reflected in embodied and participatory approaches (Ferrer, 2008; Vaughan, 1995).

Yet integration cannot be assumed. Wilber (1998) observed that even advanced spiritual attainment may coexist with unintegrated shadow material, a point echoed in experiential accounts emphasising that spiritual insight does not automatically resolve grief, trauma, relational pain, or embodied suffering (Kornfield, 2000; Wilber, 1991).

Welwood (2000) shifted attention from spiritual development to defensive dynamics, proposing that spiritual beliefs or practices may be used to avoid unresolved psychological or emotional material, a phenomenon he termed *spiritual bypassing*. Expanding on Welwood's notion of premature transcendence, Tousignant (2023) describes spiritual bypassing as the shadow of transcendence, locating the problem not in transcendence itself but in its premature enactment.

Spiritual bypassing is widely understood as a protective response to psychological pain, in which spiritual ideals may function defensively, resulting in emotional avoidance,

dissociation, or self-judgement rather than integration (Fox et al., 2017; Masters, 2010; Picciotto et al., 2017; Welwood, 1984). Such dynamics may be reinforced within structured spiritual communities where shared practices and narratives shape spiritual identity (Masters, 2010; Sherrell & Simmer-Brown, 2017; Welwood, 2000).

Against this background, the present study examines whether Transpersonal Coaching Psychology (TCP), a client-led and whole-person approach supporting the integration of spiritual experience with psychological and embodied dimensions (Dängeli, 2022), may provide a framework for recognising and addressing spiritual bypassing within spiritually oriented contexts.

Method

Participants and Context

Eight pro bono clients were coached over a two-month period (October–December 2025), for a total of 25 sessions. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 61 and were heterogeneous in nationality, gender, and cultural background. All had an established meditation practice (2.5–30 years) and a long-standing affiliation with the same yoga and meditation community (2.5–25 years); five were residential members (1.5–17 years). To preserve confidentiality, the organisation is not named.

Participants were intentionally drawn from a shared spiritual framework characterised by structured practices, values, and aspirational ideals that may both support transformation and shape the manifestation of spiritual bypassing. They were not recruited on the basis of identified spiritual bypassing, nor was the term necessarily used during coaching. Rather, patterns later interpreted as spiritual bypassing emerged through exploration of emotional, relational, and embodied difficulties and were examined retrospectively in the context of this study.

Coaching Process

Sessions were conducted online (three clients) or face-to-face (five clients), lasting 60–105 minutes. Clients engaged in two to seven sessions, depending on assessed needs and availability. Coaching followed a client-led, trauma-aware approach characterised by careful

pacing, attention to emotional regulation, and titrated engagement with sensitive material (Dängeli, 2023). The work was informed by Transpersonal Coaching Psychology (TCP), an integrative coaching approach supporting growth and transformation across the full spectrum of human experience (Dängeli, 2022).

Open Awareness (OA)–based inquiry was used as a non-directive process expanding awareness of inner experience (Dängeli, 2019). Core interventions included grounding practices, somatic open awareness, parts-oriented inquiry, re-sourcing processes supporting expanded personal and relational perspectives, and the Transpersonal Coaching Model (TCM) for exploring identity, values, and purpose (Dängeli, 2018, 2022). Emphasis was placed on translating insight into embodied clarity and practical action through future resourcing and identification of viable next steps. An illustrative example of the process is provided in Appendix A.

Given the potential psychological vulnerability associated with spiritual bypassing, ethical boundaries and psychological safety were prioritised (Geldenhuys, 2024; IACTM, n.d.). All clients provided informed consent for anonymised use of data.

Data Analysis

An exploratory mixed-methods design was used. A retrospective pre–post questionnaire explored self-reported shifts across ten dimensions associated with spiritual bypassing. The instrument, developed for this study based on themes in the coaching literature (Cashwell et al., 2004, 2007, 2011), is not a validated psychometric measure (see Appendix C). The retrospective format accommodated increased awareness emerging during coaching.

Qualitative data from written reflections and session notes were analysed using a light thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) combined with critical reflection informed by relevant theory (Finlay, 2008). All qualitative data were originally provided in Italian and translated into English by the author.

Results

Qualitative themes are presented below, with quantitative shifts summarised in Appendix B and practices in Table 1, illustrating how coaching supported shifts in relation to spiritual bypassing.

Theme 1 – From Spiritual Abstraction to Grounded Clarity

Participants described increased clarity and practical orientation in relation to inner experience and life direction. Client 8 reported feeling “a clear direction and practical tools,” alongside reduced inner division and greater agency. He soon enacted a significant life decision aligned with this shift. Client 7 described “calm, clarity, courage, lightness, and a different perspective where previously there had been worry and anxiety,” together with “the strength to face some situations with a positive and open attitude.” The Transpersonal Coaching Model (TCM; Dängeli, 2022) provided a structured framework for this exploration. As Client 6 noted, “seeing each step made the process very concrete.” Exploration of future directions, resources, and next steps supported movement from insight to action.

Theme 2 – Embodied Presence and Emotional Integration

Participants described a shift from emotional avoidance to embodied presence, with greater capacity to remain with emotional activation as it unfolded in the body. Client 8 summarised this as “staying with myself” and “learning to make friends with fear.” Client 6 spoke of staying with what he called “a disgusting and negative energy,” rather than escaping into meditation, and reported greater engagement in relational contexts. Client 1 described painful dynamics, “hidden for many years,” coming into awareness “without feeling overwhelmed” or “invaded by the analysis of the situation,” and indicated that this regulated contact supported a safer and more stable engagement with spiritual experience. Somatic open awareness and parts-oriented exploration supported this regulated and integrative process.

Theme 3 – From Shame and Moralised Spirituality to Self-Compassion

In some cases, spiritual bypassing manifested through moralised self-judgement when perceived spiritual or personal standards were not met. This pattern was most clearly illustrated by Client 2, who described an internal “severe teacher” and held the belief, “I do not fully deserve divine love.” When experiencing anger, doubt, or relational conflict, parts of herself were labelled “dirty,” “bad,” or “disgusting,” accompanied by an impulse to escape “into the light.” She also described inner conflict and shame for prioritising her spiritual path over shared life projects with her husband. Through OA practices and parts-oriented exploration, these dynamics were approached with greater patience and compassion. As shame softened, she described relating to these parts with increased understanding rather than spiritual self-criticism.

Theme 4 – Integration of Inner Parts and Shadow Material

Participants described recognition and acceptance of previously rejected aspects of self, alongside reduced internal polarisation and greater integration of shadow material. Client 1 recognised that at times it was not her adult self relating to others, but her “inner child who often feels misunderstood and hurt.” Client 2 described exploring inner parts as “messengers, with a positive purpose in protecting or strengthening me.” Client 8 reported becoming more “democratic” with himself, learning to give space to his inner voices: “Each one has a story to tell that can help me.” Compassionate inquiry and parts-oriented exploration supported a shift from spiritual self-judgement and internal splitting toward greater coherence. Rather than overriding unwanted inner states, participants reported learning to include them within a broader sense of self.

Theme 5 – Integration into Everyday Life, Relationships, and Leadership

Participants described concrete changes in everyday life, expressed through greater agency and grounded action. Client 7 expressed a shift in leadership stance as “pleasing Dharma rather than people,” indicating reduced people-pleasing and stronger alignment with

inner values. Perspective-shifting and re-sourcing processes supported more resourceful relational choices. Client 5 reported increased empathy and a softening of rigid positions, allowing greater connection and reduced frustration. Client 4 described moving from forgiveness as a spiritual ideal toward a felt understanding of the other's wounds, leading to compassion grounded in lived comprehension. Across cases, participants reported clearer decision-making, improved self-regulation, and greater flexibility in daily life and relationships.

Table 1

Illustrative Coaching Practices Supporting Shifts in Relation to Spiritual Bypassing

Observed Patterns Related to Spiritual Bypassing	Coaching Focus	Illustrative Practices Used in Coaching
Lack of Clarity or Life Direction	Clarifying direction through exploration of values, purpose, and inner resources	Open Awareness exploratory inquiry (e.g. Jumi Tree), Transpersonal Coaching Model (TCM), present- and future-oriented resourcing
Emotional Avoidance and Disembodiment	Developing grounded contact with emotional and embodied experience	Somatic open awareness practices, grounding exercises, gentle exploration of inner parts and emotional triggers
Shame and Moralised Self-Judgement	Softening harsh self-evaluation and developing compassionate awareness	Parts-oriented inquiry with judging parts, resourcing practices across time, values-based reflection
Avoidance of Shadow or Disowned Aspects	Supporting contact with rejected or feared aspects of self	Parts exploration and integration, relational resourcing practices, open awareness inquiry

Difficulty Integrating Spirituality with Everyday Life	Translating spiritual insight into relational awareness and practical action	Future-oriented resourcing, relational resourcing (e.g. perspective shifts), small-step integration into daily life
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Note: Practices emerged within a client-led coaching process and are presented as illustrative examples rather than a fixed protocol.

Discussion

Overview of Key Findings in Relation to Spiritual Bypassing

This study examined the usefulness of TCP in recognising and addressing spiritual bypassing among individuals engaged in committed spiritual practice. Findings indicate shifts from avoidant uses of spirituality toward greater embodiment, integration, and practical agency, consistent with accounts of spiritual bypassing as a defensive or dissociative use of spiritual concepts (Fox et al., 2017; Masters, 2010; Welwood, 2000).

From Reliance on Spiritual Justifications to Embodied Agency

Themes 1 and 5 illustrate a movement from spiritual justification toward embodied agency, as participants translated insight into concrete action. Spiritual orientation remained meaningful but no longer functioned to defer responsibility or bypass challenges. In light of Welwood's (2000) notion of premature transcendence, this shift suggests a reconfiguration of spirituality as an embodied and participatory process (Ferrer, 2008) supporting psychological integration and practical engagement rather than compensatory striving (Vaughan, 1995).

Embodiment and Emotional Integration

As illustrated in Theme 2, participants described a shift toward embodied presence and emotional integration. Increased contact with emotion suggests reduced dissociative and

avoidant dynamics associated with spiritual bypassing (Masters, 2010; Welwood, 2011). Rather than bypassing emotional activation, participants demonstrated greater tolerance for emotional experience, consistent with trauma-informed models of regulated engagement (Porges, 2022; Siegel, 2010). Careful pacing and titrated exploration within coaching (Dängeli, 2022) appeared to support this development. In at least one case, such regulated contact was associated with a safer and more stable engagement with spiritual experience, suggesting that psychological integration may support sustainable spiritual development (Vaughan, 1995).

Shame, Self-Judgement, and Moralised Spirituality

As illustrated in Theme 3, spiritual bypassing in some cases manifested through moralised self-judgement when spiritual standards were not met. The “severe teacher” described by Client 2 and the belief “I do not fully deserve divine love” exemplify how internalised spiritual ideals may function as self-criticism rather than integration. This dynamic echoes Welwood’s (2000) concept of the spiritual superego. Vaughan (1995) similarly notes that guilt and fear of punishment may reinforce unworthiness through spiritually framed striving. The findings suggest that TCP supported a softening of these dynamics by fostering emotional honesty, differentiation of inner parts, and self-compassion, enabling a more integrated relationship with spiritual practice.

Working With Shadow, Parts, and Relational Dynamics

As illustrated in Theme 4, participants described increased recognition and acceptance of previously rejected aspects of self, alongside reduced internal polarisation. This reflects processes commonly described as shadow and parts integration, central to psychological and spiritual maturity (Ford, 1998; Masters, 2010; Schwartz, 2021).

Relationally (Theme 5), greater internal coherence corresponded with more authentic engagement and reduced people-pleasing. Shifts from rigid spiritual expectations toward broader perspectives were associated with increased empathy and grounded relational choices. Welwood (2011) notes that structured spiritual settings may amplify projection and

unresolved attachment; the present findings suggest that parts integration may help mitigate such dynamics. Within TCP, a non-pathologising parts-oriented stance provides a framework for facilitating these developments (De Vitto, 2025).

Implications for the Use of TCP in Recognising and Addressing Spiritual Bypassing

The findings indicate that TCP may support integration of dynamics associated with spiritual bypassing among individuals engaged in committed spiritual practice. Two overlapping patterns emerged. First, among spiritually committed individuals seeking to live their spiritual practice in daily life, TCP facilitated greater alignment between spiritual ideals and embodied agency. Second, among participants residing within a shared spiritual environment, TCP supported recognition of moralised self-judgement, internal polarisation, and relational projection, fostering greater psychological integration and authenticity. Moreover, in two cases involving prior destabilising spiritual experience (Clients 1 and 6), TCP appeared to offer a trauma-aware framework supporting safer re-engagement with spiritual practice. Taken together, these observations suggest that TCP may offer an integrative framework for addressing spiritual bypassing while maintaining psychological safety and appropriate scope of practice.

Limitations, Precautions, and Ethical Considerations

The study involved a small sample of individuals engaged in committed spiritual practice within a shared spiritual framework, reflecting the study focus but limiting generalisability beyond comparable settings. Variation in session numbers across participants may have influenced outcomes. The dual role of the author as coach and researcher, alongside longstanding immersion in a spiritual community, may also have influenced interpretation despite ongoing reflexive awareness.

Spiritual bypassing may function as a coping strategy linked to trauma or psychological vulnerability. In such cases, TCP may be insufficient and referral to psychotherapy is indicated (Geldenhuys, 2024). Distinguishing mature spiritual commitment

from bypass-related idealisation may also require experiential familiarity with spiritual practice (Vaughan, 1995). Ethical TCP practice therefore requires a clearly defined scope of practice and a trauma-aware stance prioritising psychological safety.

Conclusion

This study examined the potential of Transpersonal Coaching Psychology (TCP) to recognise and address patterns of spiritual bypassing among individuals engaged in committed spiritual practice. Findings indicate shifts in dynamics commonly associated with spiritual bypassing, from avoidant or moralised uses of spirituality toward greater embodiment, integration, and practical agency. Spiritual orientation remained significant, supporting grounded and authentic engagement in everyday life rather than distancing from psychological or relational challenges. Overall, the study suggests that TCP may provide an integrative and trauma-aware framework for addressing spiritual bypassing and facilitating integration through embodied, relational, and client-led processes.

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Appendix A

Illustrative Example of a TCP-Informed Coaching Process in Relation to Spiritual Bypassing

The following description illustrates how TCP-informed coaching processes were applied in practice. While the sequence reflects a typical progression, the process remained client-led and was adapted depending on the presenting dynamics, such as emotional avoidance, relational challenges, moralised self-judgement, or difficulty integrating spiritual insight into everyday life.

Illustrative Process

1. Sessions typically began with attuned listening to the client's narrative, eliciting key experiences, triggers, and patterns of response. From this initial exploration, patterns consistent with spiritual bypassing often began to emerge.
2. This was followed by grounding and Open Awareness (OA) practices, supporting expanded awareness of present-moment experience.

3. Somatic awareness and exploratory practices (e.g. Jumi Tree) were then introduced, facilitating contact with emotional activation in the body. During this phase, patterns of spiritual bypassing were recognised through discrepancies between cognitive narratives and embodied experience, for example when emotional activation was reframed or avoided through spiritual interpretation.
4. As awareness deepened, the process often shifted toward exploration of underlying dynamics. Depending on the client's presentation, this involved:
 - Parts-oriented inquiry, through which internal dynamics (e.g. protective or critical parts) were recognised and differentiated.
 - Use of the Transpersonal Coaching Model (TCM), clarifying values, identity, and direction, and beginning to orient the process toward meaningful action.
5. Once these dynamics were recognised, coaching moved toward addressing and integration. This included:
 - Re-sourcing processes, fostering a more compassionate and expanded perspective.
 - Relational or perspective-shifting work, particularly where patterns involved projection or withdrawal.
 - Continued use of the Transpersonal Coaching Model (TCM), aligning values, identity, and action.
 - Future-oriented processes (e.g. Three-Phase Future Pace), supporting integration through anticipatory experience.
6. The process typically concluded with identification of a “next smallest step,” facilitating translation of insight into concrete action in everyday life.
7. A final phase involved somatic awareness and reflective integration, consolidating the work and fostering embodiment.

Appendix B

Retrospective Pre–Post Ratings Across Questionnaire Items

Scale: 1 = Not at all true • 2 = Slightly true • 3 = Moderately true • 4 = Very true • 5 = Completely true

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
	Nr of sessions		Pain avoid.	Emotional avoid.	Body disconn.	Response deferral	Psych. avoid.	Spiritual image	Self-judgement	Feeling shame	Feeling superior	Life integration	Changed items (n)
CL 1	7	before	4	4	4.5	4.5	1	4.5	3	4	4	4	9
		now	2	2	1.5	1.5	1	2	2.5	2	2	2	
CL 2	3	before	3	4	4	4	3	2	2	2	3	2	5
		now	2	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	
CL 3	3	before	2	2	3	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	4
		now	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	
CL 4	2	before	4	3	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	3	10
		now	3	2	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	2	
CL 5	3	before	2	2	2	1	1	3	4	5	5	5	6
		now	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	3	2	3	
CL 6	3	before	2	3	3	3	5	4	2	3	3	2	4
		now	2	3	2	3	4	3	2	2	3	2	
CL 7	2	before	2	3	2	2	3	4	3	3	2	3	6

		now	1	2	2	1	3	2	2	2	2	3	
CL 8	2	before	2	3	3	1	1	3	3	3	3	2	7
		now	1	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	3	1	

Note: Column headings are abbreviated for space. *Before* refers to participants' retrospective self-assessment of their functioning prior to coaching; *Now* refers to their self-assessment after the coaching process. *Pain avoid.* = avoidance of emotional pain; *Emotional avoid.* = emotional avoidance; *Body disconn.* = bodily disconnection; *Respons. deferral* = deferral of personal responsibility through spiritual framing; *Psych. avoid.* = belief that spiritual practice replaces psychological or emotional processing; *Spiritual image* = spiritual self-presentation; *Self-judgement* = self-critical evaluation framed in spiritual or moral terms; *Feeling shame* = shame and concealment of difficulties due to misalignment with spiritual identity; *Feeling superior* = sense of spiritual or moral superiority; *Life integration* = difficulty integrating spiritual and everyday life. *Changed items (n)* indicates the number of items showing a different rating in the retrospective pre–post comparison. The questionnaire was used as an exploratory reflective tool and is not a validated psychometric instrument. Data are presented for descriptive, exploratory purposes only.

Appendix C

Spiritual Bypassing Awareness Questionnaire (Retrospective Pre–Post Version)

This study-specific questionnaire is not a validated measure. It was developed for exploratory purposes based on themes identified in the spiritual bypassing literature (Cashwell et al., 2004, 2007, 2011). The questionnaire was administered in Italian; this English version is included for reference.

For each statement, please indicate how you believe you were before the coaching process and how you feel now, using the scale below.

Scale: 1 = Not at all true · 2 = Slightly true · 3 = Moderately true · 4 = Very true · 5 = Completely true

1. I tended to rely on spiritual concepts or practices to avoid engaging with emotional pain.

Before ____ Now ____

2. I tended to reject or suppress negative emotions rather than acknowledging and working through them.

Before ____ Now ____

3. I tended to feel disconnected from my body and less able to perceive my emotional states on a physical level.

Before ____ Now ____

4. I tended to interpret emotional or relational difficulties primarily through spiritual explanations, rather than addressing the underlying emotions and recurring patterns.

(e.g. “It is all an illusion”, “Everyone is inherently good”, “This is an opportunity”, “Master will take care of it”).

Before ____ Now ____

5. I tended to believe that spiritual practice could fully replace psychological or emotional awareness processes.

Before ____ Now ____

6. I tended to feel pressure to present myself as spiritually advanced.

Before ____ Now ____

7. I tended to judge myself for not being “spiritual enough” or for experiencing difficult emotions or thoughts.

Before ____ Now ____

8. I tended to feel shame about my difficulties and to conceal them because they did not align with the spiritual identity I wished to present.

Before ____ Now ____

9. At times, I experienced a subtle sense of superiority based on my spiritual insights or practices.

Before ____ Now ____

10. I experienced difficulties integrating everyday life with spiritual life.

Before ____ Now ____

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About the author

Sahaja Mascia Ellero is a transpersonal coach, spiritual counsellor, trainer, and author whose work focuses on the integration of spiritual practice with psychological and relational development. She has lived for over three decades in a spiritual community and has extensive experience facilitating self-transformation within spiritually oriented contexts. Sahaja is the creator of the *Liberi dai Vecchi Solchi*[®] (Free from Your Old Grooves) method, a practical approach supporting the transformation of habitual mental and emotional patterns through inner integration. She has also developed *Il Prossimo Passo*[®] (Your Next Step), a transpersonal coaching method. Her work draws on transpersonal psychology, contemplative traditions, and embodied approaches to personal growth. She completed the Professional Certificate in Transpersonal Coaching Psychology with Alef Trust and is a yoga and meditation teacher in the tradition of Paramhansa Yogananda. Her current research focuses on spiritual bypassing and the integration of spiritual development in contemporary spiritual contexts. Learn more about or contact Sahaja at <https://www.accendilatualuce.it/>

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Safeguarding the Soul: Love, Longing and Self Leadership

Jo Nash, PhD

Abstract

This coaching case study began by exploring a highly sensitive thirty-year-old woman's struggle with dating boundaries after a long break from intimate relationships. While the early focus was navigating boundaries in romantic relationships, the coaching process gradually evolved into a deeper inquiry involving archetypal representations of Self and others using both Internal Family Systems (IFS) parts work and active imagination. As coaching unfolded, interpersonal boundary concerns expanded into intrapsychic and existential boundary enquiries spanning the transpersonal domain. The client's process progressed from an exploration of relationship concerns to symbolic meaning-making, values clarification, and eventually, her yearning to reestablish a lost connection with a felt sense of transpersonal presence after a lengthy spiritually dry period. The coaching approach included somatic grounding practices to establish co-regulated presence, and open awareness to track glimmers of the Self, while *unblending* from protector parts that were 'safeguarding the soul' across both interpersonal and transpersonal domains.

Keywords: boundaries, safeguarding, open awareness, parts work, Self leadership, presence, love.

Recommended citation

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Introduction

This article presents an analysis of nine coaching sessions conducted over 14 hours in 2025. My client's journey exemplified how the cultivation of Self leadership serves as a crucible of transformation during the transpersonal coaching process (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2019; Schwartz, 2023). Sophia (a pseudonym) initially described challenges trusting her boundaries with potential male partners, especially one man she met through an online dating app. While the early focus was navigating boundaries in romantic relationships, the coaching process gradually shifted toward a deeper inquiry into archetypal representations of Self and others (Jung, 1991/1959), using both parts work (DeVitto, 2025) and active imagination (Vaughan, 2013).

According to the Internal Family Systems (IFS)-informed approach, the psyche is understood as comprising multiple 'parts' that develop protective roles in response to life experiences, surrounding a core 'Self'. In this context, Self refers to an embodied state of calm, clarity, and compassion that supports reflective rather than reactive responding (Schwartz, 2023). Self leadership entails responding from this reflective, resourceful place. Parts were accessed using active imagination, a process that allows images, figures and dialogues to emerge using semi-guided visualisation in a mindful, reflective state (Vaughan, 2013). Some images that arise might be archetypal in nature, meaning they symbolise deeper, culturally inherited patterns of meaning-making (Jung, 1991/1959). From an IFS perspective, relationship difficulties arise when protective parts are mobilised in an attempt to safeguard wounded parts and maintain psychological safety.

As the work unfolded, interpersonal boundary concerns evolved into intrapsychic and existential boundary enquiries spanning the transpersonal domain (Hartelius, Rothe & Roy, 2013). Sophia's process progressed from an exploration of relationship concerns to symbolic meaning-making and eventually, her yearning to reestablish a lost connection with a felt sense of transpersonal presence (Stephen & Rowan, 2018; Ganga Maa, 2024).

In this context, the term 'soul' is used to refer to a facility for open, trusting, transpersonal experience that may be veiled by activated protector parts. Here, the coaching process supported psychological integration by safeguarding the soul through the cultivation of Self leadership.

My transpersonal coaching approach included mindful grounding techniques using breathwork and sensory attention; active listening that prioritised the client's meaning, emotion, and intent (Nichols & Strauss, 2021); and open awareness, characterised by a reflective, mindful state involving "...a fluid, dynamic balance between conscious focus and peripheral awareness" (Geldenhuys & Dängeli, 2018, p. 106). Also, values clarification (Hayes, 2019) work supported meaningful courses of action and the development of client-centred boundary-setting skills (Tawwab, 2021).

Conceptually, the work was informed by a nested understanding of the Self: the IFS Self as an accessible, embodied and experiential mode of inner leadership; the Jungian Self as a symbolic and archetypal organising principle; and nondual Presence as the existential crucible of psychic transformation and integration. This framework guided discernment, pacing, and ethical restraint during the coaching process, and was not a prescriptive model.

During each session, after grounding the client somatically and exploring the trigger that had evoked a stress response, termed the 'presenting issue', I actively listened for glimmers of the Self (Siebart, 2023) throughout the coaching process. The opposite of triggers, glimmers are often observed in non-verbal changes to facial expression, posture, and vocal tone that emerge during co-regulation with open awareness and help orientate the client towards Self as the container of resourcefulness (Schwartz, 2023) during parts work.

Method

Coaching context and structure

Sophia was a woman in her early thirties educated in psychology who described herself as a highly sensitive person. Her psychological insight and reflective capacity significantly shaped the depth and trajectory of coaching, allowing easy movement between experiential, symbolic, and contemplative modalities, while maintaining psychological safety. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, clear contracting, and attention to safeguarding, were maintained throughout (Geldenhuys, 2024).

Sophia's online coaching sessions ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in duration, increasing from fortnightly to weekly as the work deepened. Initially, time was dedicated to

establishing rapport, clarifying coaching fit, and agreeing shared intentions. A collaborative focus emerged around two interlinked aims:

- (1) supporting Sophia to clarify and live from her core values as an “inner compass,” and
- (2) increasing access to Self by *unblending* from (meaning observing rather than identifying with) parts that generated internal conflict, anxiety, or relational reactivity.

Values clarification and access to Self were observed as mutually reinforcing, with clarity in one supporting access to the other.

Coaching approach

In practice, grounding practices were introduced to each session to establish co-presence, co-regulation, and nervous system safety. Parts work was introduced gradually, with careful attention to pacing, consent, and closure (DeVitto, 2025).

Open awareness (Geldenhuys & Dängeli, 2018) was used both implicitly, through the quality of presence held in sessions, and explicitly, through guided practices while noticing sensations, emotions, and thoughts without judgement. Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) exercises were used to clarify values while accepting uncomfortable internal experiences, and committing to values-aligned action (Hayes, 2019), particularly in relation to boundary setting (Tawwab, 2012).

My role was deliberately non-directive. Rather than interpreting or advising, I focused on holding space as a compassionate relational field (Plett, 2020) to facilitate Sophia’s exploration of her inner world, and the differentiation of protective strategies from core yearnings (Hayes, 2019). When psychoeducation was offered (for example, around nervous system responses), this was in service of normalisation, not psychopathology.

Transpersonal Framework and Boundary Domains

The coaching process engaged with three interrelated domains of boundary formation. At an experiential level, early sessions focused on interpersonal boundaries in dating, supported by open awareness and parts work to help Sophia differentiate between protective parts and authentic relational signals (Schwartz, 2023). This corresponded to strengthening access to the IFS Self as a calm, compassionate, and discerning inner resource.

As safety and trust developed, symbolic material began to emerge through imagery and spontaneous meaning-making. Archetypal patterns became discernible, including the absent father, the fragile or neglectful mother, the abandoned inner child longing to be chosen, and a nascent individuation process based on self-trust and discernment. These elements of the coaching process were approached phenomenologically through reflective inquiry rather than interpretation, consistent with a Jungian understanding of the Self as an organising symbolic field rather than a literal explanatory structure (Vaughan, 2013).

Initially, Sophia wanted to explore her struggle with dating boundaries after a long break from intimate relationships. This issue gradually evolved into a longing for a reconnection with impersonal Love as divine Presence following a lengthy ‘spiritually dry’ period (Stephen & Rowan, 2018). Here, impersonal Love refers to an experience of nourishing connection not involving personal relationships with others such as partners, family, or friends.

Throughout, coaching prioritised discernment, grounding, and the re-establishment of a trustworthy inner relationship with Presence through tracking glimmers of the Self during the coaching dialogue, using open awareness to facilitate active imagination, along with self-enquiry exercises between weekly sessions, supported by email.

Transpersonal and Ethical Considerations

The coaching explicitly acknowledged transpersonal dimensions, particularly experiences of impersonal Love that arose later in the work (Ferrer, 2001). These experiences were met with sensitivity and discernment and grounded in embodied awareness. Throughout, ethical considerations (Geldenhuys, 2024) included maintaining appropriate boundaries, the normalisation rather than pathologising of experience, and remaining mindful of the potential for spiritual bypassing (Welwood, 1990). The aim was to ensure that Sophia consistently left sessions feeling validated, ‘seen’, resourceful, and grounded.

Results

Several themes emerged during coaching, including relational boundaries, attachment patterns, access to Self, and values-based living. Early sessions focused on understanding Sophia’s dating experiences and the anxiety and self-doubt they evoked. Through parts

exploration, distinct internal dynamics became visible, including a young part longing for connection, a self-sufficient protector that suppressed expressions of vulnerability and intimacy needs, and adolescent parts expressing doubt and vigilance.

A pivotal session involved deeper experiential parts work following a recent dating encounter. As Sophia unblended from her self-sufficient part, she was able to recognise its protective role in response to early deprivation, while also acknowledging how its rigidity limited vulnerability and intimacy in the present. From a more Self-led state, Sophia was able to offer compassion and reassurance to younger parts, leading to a felt sense of internal softening and relief. Importantly, this work supported a reframe of her dating experiences from pathology (e.g., “avoidant attachment”) to appropriate boundary-testing and discernment.

Subsequent sessions consolidated these shifts. Sophia reported feeling lighter, more validated, and increasingly able to trust her internal signals. Work returned periodically to early attachment wounds, particularly her longing to be chosen and fear of abandonment as intimacy deepened. Protector and manager parts were identified that over-performed to maintain connection while ignoring ‘red flags’. These were met with curiosity and compassion, not judgement.

Later sessions widened the lens to include systemic influences, such as parentification within the maternal relationship and inherited, culturally determined expectations around care, love, and responsibility. Between-session practices were introduced to support Self-led unblending and regulation, enhancing Sophia’s capacity to process these dynamics independently.

Following a painful dating rupture involving betrayal and ghosting, sessions focused on boundaries, processing righteous anger, and nervous system regulation. Young parts carrying beliefs about worthiness and responsibility were met with compassion and embodied reassurance. Somatic shifts, such as the softening of chronic tension around the jaw, were noted, alongside Sophia’s increased trust in her own internal authority.

The final sessions marked a reorientation toward meaning and presence. Values clarification exercises helped Sophia decide what truly mattered to her, with interpersonal boundaries arising naturally from this clarity. Sophia identified authenticity as a primary value experienced as integrity through Self leadership.

While exploring the meaning of authenticity in relation to her prioritisation of intimate relationships, spirituality, and work, Sophia expressed her longing to re-establish a relationship with an impersonally loving Presence, which she had enjoyed during several years practicing meditation in Southeast Asia. She described how this connection was eroded by spiritually wounding encounters with inauthentic groups, teachers, and cult-like spiritual communities. Sophia linked her prizing of authenticity to a need for reconnection with Presence (or God) after these experiences had left her feeling mistrustful and her soul wounded. Following a spiritually dry period lasting several years, she explored her longing for reconnection and experience of Presence as an emergent quality of increased Self-leadership, values alignment, and internal coherence.

The cultivation of embodied Self-leadership, values-based boundary setting, and deepening authenticity serviced ‘safeguarding the soul’ of the client to facilitate this longed-for reconnection.

Discussion

Sophia’s case highlights the effectiveness of a transpersonal, parts-informed approach to coaching clients navigating relational transitions (DeVitto, 2025; Schwartz, 2023). Pacing and containment were crucial. While Sophia was open to experiential work, sustained access to Self emerged only when sufficient safety and trust were established through grounding and open awareness. Prioritising co-presence and co-regulation provided a robust sense of psychological safety within the held space (Plett, 2020).

From an intra-personal perspective, the work required ongoing mindfulness and self-awareness on my part (Geldenhuys, 2024). A deep resonance with Sophia’s attachment material required careful monitoring of countertransference and repeated recommitment to a non-rescuing stance (Stephen, & Rowan, 2018). Regular journaling and reflection supported my ethical self-monitoring and professional boundaries.

The transpersonal dimension of coaching emerged organically rather than being imposed. Sophia’s desire to reconnect with Presence in a field of impersonal Love (Godman, 1988; Ganga Maa, 2024) arose as she unblended from various parts while clarifying values, requiring my calibrated discernment of her transformational process. Post-session reflections on my work with other clients further highlighted that when spirituality intersects with

trauma and crisis, grounding and safeguarding must take precedence over exploration. This insight strengthened my appreciation of context-sensitive, client-centred pacing.

Values clarification was a stabilising and orienting process throughout Sophia's coaching. Values provided embodied reference points guiding boundaries, decisions, and self-trust. This deepened my appreciation of how values clarification and accessing Self-leadership are mutually reinforcing processes (Falconer, 2023; Schwartz, 2023).

Reflecting on this case using a nested understanding of Self helped me understand how parts work, and values clarification could support Sophia in establishing interpersonal boundaries without collapsing into defensiveness or longing. Meanwhile, engagement with symbolic and archetypal material deepened meaning without requiring interpretive authority, as emerging archetypal images of the inner child and parental figures informed rather than directed the process.

The emergence of experiences of merging with impersonal Love were met with curiosity and compassion. Experiences of Presence were recognised and non-ordinary experiences honoured, while safeguarding against bypassing or the repetition of spiritual disillusionment. When trauma, crisis, or high sensitivity are present (DeVitto, 2023), grounding, containment, and ethical pacing are an essential foundation for transpersonal exploration.

Moreover, working within scope and maintaining clear boundaries ensure that clients leave sessions grounded and resourced. The work deepened my conviction that transpersonal coaching supports clients' ability to live with greater awareness, integrity, and compassion by normalising suffering and integrating non-ordinary experiences in a transpersonal field of loving Presence.

Conclusion

This case study depicts my work as a transpersonal coach holding space for my client's relational, psychological, and transpersonal processing with ethical discernment and care. During my work with Sophia, I witnessed a gradual shift from internal conflict and self-doubt toward embodied Self-leadership, values-based boundary setting, and an increased trust in her inner authority, grounded in her connection to presence as impersonal love.

Sophia contacted me several months after coaching ended with valuable feedback. She explained how our work together cultivated her emotional capacity to meet a loving, emotionally mature partner and that she now feels safe in a new relationship for the very first time. She shared that she is still integrating our work, but has a renewed sense of faith and no longer feels abandoned by God.

The follow-up confirmed that the transpersonal coaching process benefited from my commitment to client-centred, non-directive practice grounded in presence, curiosity, and compassion. Overall, my work with Sophia strengthened my confidence in transpersonal coaching as a process that honours both human vulnerability and innate potential, by supporting clients navigating life transitions with greater resourcefulness, insight, and integrity.

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About the author

Jo Nash recently qualified as a transpersonal coach at Alef Trust. She has a PhD in Psychotherapy Studies from the University of Sheffield, UK, where she was a Lecturer in Mental Health for over a decade. Currently, Jo works as a freelance coach, researcher, coaching tool developer, and writer. Jo has over 20 years of coaching experience and specialises in working with highly sensitive and neurodivergent adults experiencing life transitions, relationship challenges, and crises of meaning in a neurotypical world. She is especially interested in helping clients to explore and integrate non-ordinary experiences in service of normalisation and psychological safety. Her work is informed by her passion for independent adventure travelling, cross cultural psychology and spiritual enquiry. To learn or find out more about Jo Nash, search for *Jo Nash PhD* online.

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Bridging the Gap: Transpersonal Coaching as a Catalyst for Parental Transformation and Generational Healing

Darren Langer

Abstract

Parenting serves as a profound developmental crucible, yet it frequently triggers regressive emotional states that hinder both parental well-being and child development. This report explores how Transpersonal Coaching Psychology can facilitate a shift from reactive "tunnel awareness" to a state of "open awareness," allowing parents to navigate the complexities of authority and autonomy with greater composure and connectedness. The study utilized a qualitative approach, engaging 16 pro bono clients from a high-agency global community in 50 remote coaching sessions over a three-month period. Data collection included session transcripts and post-session clinical logs, which were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) to identify universal patterns in family dynamics and the internal landscapes of participating parents.

Analysis revealed common themes of power struggles and physiological triggers, with 14 of 16 participants reporting a habitual "fight" response characterized by parental shouting. Furthermore, shame emerged as a "double-edged sword," acting both as a debilitating internal barrier to authentic connection and a weaponized tool for control. The discussion highlights how the Transpersonal Coaching Method (TCM) and Parts Work facilitate a shift from an ego-logical mindset of

control to an eco-logical model of leadership. When parents were able to integrate their own “internal family,” they reported being more compassionate and resourceful with respect to their children’s needs. Ultimately, this project demonstrates that when parents transcend their egoic triggers, they can transition from a rivalrous dynamic to a participatory partnership with their children. Transpersonal Coaching for parents is an invitation to and catalyst for profound, generational healing.

Keywords: parenting, family, shame, compassion, transpersonal leadership

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Introduction

“The first image I have of myself as a child is the child that my mother sees.”
 (Rovelli, 2018, p.153)

Parenting is a psychologically demanding and emotionally charged role that requires ongoing regulation in the context of strong attachment bonds and evolving developmental paths. While parents are often motivated by aspirations to provide safety, guidance, and emotional attunement, the parent-child relationship frequently activates intense affective responses that can interfere with these goals. Heightened stress, perceived threats to authority, and challenges to autonomy may elicit reactive patterns such as shouting, withdrawal, or shame-based responses, which parents themselves often experience as misaligned with their values. Although much of the parenting literature has historically focused on behavioral management strategies and child-directed interventions, there has been growing recognition that parents’ internal psychological processes play a critical role in shaping parent-child interactions. Belsky (1984) identifies the parent's psychological well-being as a critical

determinant of the quality of parenting, while Siegel (2014) highlights how a parent's self-awareness and integration directly influence a child's neurological and emotional development. Interventions that target parents' internal experiences, rather than exclusively focusing on behavior modification, may therefore be particularly well suited to addressing relational challenges and maladaptive interactional cycles. Transpersonal Coaching Psychology (TCPJ, n.d.) offers a unique framework for such an approach by expanding the coaching process beyond ego-based problem solving. It combines reflective, somatic, and meaning-oriented dimensions of experience, with the aim of cultivating greater psychological flexibility, self-compassion, and perspective taking (Dängeli, 2022). Within this framework, parents are encouraged to observe and relate differently to their internal reactions, particularly in emotionally charged situations, rather than attempting to exert control over external circumstances or their children's behavior.

According to Dängeli (2022), transpersonal coaching facilitates a shift from an "ego-logical" to an "eco-logical" perspective, fostering "Open Awareness" and mindful resilience. This approach allows individuals to disidentify from limiting beliefs and reactive "parts" of the self, creating space for wisdom and compassion. By integrating transpersonal principles, parents can move from a desire for external control toward an internal landscape of growth and healing.

This qualitative study examines parents' experiences of transpersonal coaching, with particular emphasis on the perceived impact of TCM and somatically anchored parts work. Parts work, in this context, refers to Parts Integration - a model for internal conflict resolution and psychological integration (Dängeli, 2018, p. 50). Using thematic analysis of coaching session transcripts and post-session clinical logs, this study aimed to explore how parents described their emotional and relational challenges, how they experienced the transpersonal coaching process, and what changes they perceived in their emotional regulation and parenting dynamics following engagement in Transpersonal Coaching. The interventions had a parent-centric approach, positing that the parent's internal psychological landscape is the critical lever for affecting improved parent-child relationships. It is hypothesized that through the coaching process, participants would be able to neutralize triggers and transition from a combative dynamic to a more harmonious relationship with their children.

Method

Study Design

In my capacity as a Transpersonal Coach, I solicited a specific demographic of parents to explore the efficacy of transpersonal coaching. This population was selected due to the emotional complexity and high-stakes nature of the parent-child bond. Within this population, parenting is characterized by a ‘personal’ intensity; challenges are frequently obscured from public view, held in isolation or with a co-parent, and shared only superficially with trusted peers. This study employed a qualitative design to examine parents’ experiences of transpersonal coaching. A qualitative approach was selected to allow for in-depth exploration of participants’ subjective experiences, meaning-making processes, and perceived impact of the coaching intervention. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Participants

Participants were drawn from an international professional community known as “The Leading Edge” (<https://www.theleading-edge.org/>), a group of approximately 150 individuals, including myself, characterized by high socio-economic status, professional engagement, and interest in personal and spiritual development. From this community, 16 parents volunteered to participate in pro bono transpersonal coaching and consented to the use of anonymized session data for research purposes. Participants ranged in age from 36 to 59 years and included nine men and seven women. One male and one female were divorced, and all participants identified as heterosexual. All were parents, with children ranging in age from 4 to 28 years.

Procedure

Over an eight-month period, as part of the Alef Trust Certificate Program in Transpersonal Coaching Psychology, I conducted a total of 50 coaching sessions. While 13 sessions involved peer-coaching within my cohort, the data set for this study is derived from 37 sessions conducted with 16 pro bono clients over a three-month period.

Coaching sessions were conducted remotely via secure video conferencing, each

lasting approximately 60 minutes. Participants engaged in between two and five sessions each, allowing for examination of changes and reflections across multiple encounters. Prior to engagement, all participants completed a “Needs and Values Elicitation Form” and provided informed consent for session recordings and the use of de-identified materials for research purposes. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymization of transcripts and removal of identifying information.

Intervention Components

Coaching sessions were client-led and grounded in transpersonal coaching principles, with emphasis on cultivating awareness, self-reflection, and alignment with personal values. Two primary methodological components informed the coaching process. The first was TCM (Dängeli, 2022), which emphasizes the cultivation of Open Awareness, reflective inquiry, and perspective shifts beyond ego-based identification. The second was somatically anchored ‘parts work’, informed by Parts Integration (Dängeli, 2018, p. 50), and Internal Family Systems principles (Schwartz, 2023), which conceptualizes internal experience as distinct parts that hold specific emotions, beliefs, and protective functions. Parts work was introduced flexibly based on the client’s presentation and was commonly used when participants described heightened emotional reactivity or internal conflict in parenting situations. This approach involved identifying and naming reactive parts, attending to their somatic and emotional qualities, and relating to them with curiosity and compassion rather than judgment.

Data Sources

Qualitative data consisted of verbatim session transcripts and post-session clinical logs recorded by the coach immediately following each session. Transcripts captured participants’ verbal reflections, emotional expressions, and descriptions of parenting experiences, while clinical logs documented session themes, intervention focus, and observed shifts in participant awareness or affect.

Data Analysis

Data, consisting of session transcripts and post-session clinical logs, were analyzed using Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). This process involved a

process of coding and theme development to identify universal patterns that reflected participants' experiences of the coaching process and perceived mechanisms of change. Themes were reviewed for coherence, consistency across the dataset, and relevance to the study aims.

Results

The thematic analysis identified three primary findings that characterize a profound transpersonal shift within the parent-child dynamic: moving from a reactive, defense-oriented "ego-self" to a more integrated, relational "transpersonal self." These findings are organized by baseline struggles (the problem) and the subsequent outcomes facilitated by Transpersonal Coaching and somatically anchored parts work

1. From Authoritarian Power Struggles to Authoritative Guidance

The Baseline Problem: The Battle of Wills

The most prominent baseline theme was an ongoing "battle of wills" between parental desires for control and the child's burgeoning autonomy. Participants described their children's "ability to sense a power vacuum" and recounted exhausting experiences of "endless negotiation" and a "constant state of deal-making." For some parents, the tension was so acute that "even benign requests were perceived by their child as physical threats." Prior to coaching, parents frequently operated from a "superior" vantage point, prioritizing immediate compliance through traditional behavioral controls like discipline, reward, and punishment.

Perceived Outcome: The Shift to Open Awareness

Through the induction of Open Awareness (OA)—defined as "a flow state in which the individual's experience of self-boundaries expands" (Dängeli, 2022, p. 14)—clients moved beyond a rigid, "tunnel-awareness" focus on immediate compliance. This practice allowed parents to transition from an "ego-logical" focus on personal authority to an "eco-logical" leadership model characterized by a "commitment to the well-being of the whole system" (Dängeli, 2022, p. 58).

Clients reported successfully recalling and integrating OA at the first signs of a power struggle. This expanded perspective allowed them to discern the important difference between authoritarian control and authoritative guidance. By shifting into this state, parents were able to move from a rigid focus on compliance to a broader perspective that honors the child's desire for self-determination. One parent credited cultivating OA as "a pacifier for me!", which de-escalated multiple opportunities for conflict. Another parent gained respect for their 16 year old's independence by noting that "My 50-year-old values do not and should not map perfectly onto my kids."

2. Neutralizing Emotional Triggers and the Habitual "Fight" Response

The Baseline Problem: Somatic Activation and Tunnel Awareness

Participants demonstrated remarkable ease in accessing feelings of being "activated" or "triggered" by behaviors ranging from disrespectful language to broad non-compliance. The fact that recalling such activated states - even prior to the induction of OA - was so easy, was a testament to how common they were. These triggers elicited instinctive somatic stress responses described as "boiling up inside" or "getting so heated."

In these moments, parents operated in a state of "tunnel-awareness," which Dängeli (2022) describes as a "narrowed focus of attention...often associated with stress, fear, and a sense of separation". This constricted state led a large majority of participants (14 out of 16) to report reacting with a habitual, deeply reinforced "fight" response, primarily manifested through shouting.

Perceived Outcome: Somatic Parts Work and the Reflective Pause

To interrupt this stimulus-response loop, the intervention utilized parts work as a therapeutic mechanism for "internal conflict resolution and psychological integration" (Dängeli, 2018, p. 50). Somatically anchored parts work appeared highly effective in helping parents create psychological distance from their reactivity.

For example, a client who identified her reactive state as a "She-Hulk" sub-personality - motivated by a deep-seated fear of being disrespected - was able to relate to this part with warmth, curiosity, and self-compassion. This disidentification from limiting beliefs and reactive parts created a critical reflective pause between the stimulus and the

response. Consequently, parents were empowered to bypass conditioned reflexes and choose responses aligned with their core values rather than activating deeply reinforced defense mechanisms.

3. Healing the Cycle of Shame and Cultivating Relational Presence

The Baseline Problem: Shame as a "Hand-Me-Down" and Barrier

Shame emerged as a complex, dual-layered phenomenon: it functioned both as a historical tool for parental control and a debilitating byproduct of conflict. Parents admitted to "weaponizing" shame during shouting episodes, labeling children with terms like "bad," "lazy," or "disgusting," or utilizing prolonged tactics like "the silent treatment" and "holding a grudge."

Crucially, all 14 parents who reported shaming their children experienced intense post-confrontation remorse and identity-level shame themselves. This cycle revealed an expectations layer - a tendency for parents to project their own deep fears, historical "hand-me-down" scripts, and insecurities onto their children, which acted as a severe barrier to genuine connection.

Perceived Outcome: Internal Integration and Affiliative Motivation

Parts work addressed this cycle by facilitating the integration of the parent's internal system. By witnessing their vulnerable, protective internal parts with curiosity and acceptance, parents cultivated deep self-acceptance. This internal harmony radiated outward, lessening the need to project rigid expectations onto their children.

With the dismantling of these defensive barriers, findings revealed a profound shift toward "affiliative motivation" - a deliberate reorientation toward relational quality and warmth over demanded performance (Gilbert, 2015). Clients reported intentional acts to foster co-regulation, such as implementing a "40-second hug every morning" and utilizing a "hand-squeezing 'I love you' ritual.

The importance of transformation from rigidity to presence was beautifully reinforced when a client's 7-year-old was sick over a weekend; "he stared deeply in my eyes and whispered: *'Mommy, I just need to be with you.'*" Parents expressed profound gratitude for

“finding joy in our house again,” and “things feeling way more light and fun”, attributing the newfound cooperation to “opening up” and “letting go of control”. Another parent reported a crucial difference in his relationship with his 16-year-old son as a result of the coaching: “I always let him know that I love him, but now I am making it known that I like him too, which has had a massive impact on his self-esteem and our overall connection.”

Interestingly, this transpersonal awareness extended to upstream intergenerational healing, exemplified by a client whose estranged father reached out to repair their relationship. When he asked what he could do to reconnect, she echoed the power of simple, embodied presence, replying: “Just open your arms and give us a hug.”

Discussion

This qualitative study contributes empirical depth to the application of Transpersonal Coaching Psychology by demonstrating its mechanisms of change in a parental population. In this context, effectiveness refers to participants’ perceived changes in emotional regulation, parenting dynamics, and self-understanding. The findings confirm that targeting the parent’s internal psychological process facilitates a shift from reactive control to responsive partnership, driven by increased reflective capacity and unconditional love.

By beginning each session with a call to OA, the table was set for both coach and client to be grounded, open-minded, and compassionately connected. This established a foundation for inquiry and investigation where impressions can be received prior to interpretation. A container was co-created for healthy and honest attitudes about ourselves and the shared human experience. It also brought us into our bodies in a way that heightens sensitivity to signals and cues and ties words to feelings. The resulting state was durable throughout the session as we maintained a deep regard for the dignity of ourselves and each other. The work itself effectively reinforced OA by practicing the art of leaning into discomfort directly. Clients were cultivating qualities of strength and resilience that they reported successfully integrating and allowing to arise naturally with their children - significant progress towards the fulfillment of their desired outcomes.

The initial thematic analysis confirmed that family conflict is often framed by a

"friction between two valid truths," where a child's natural desire for autonomy clashes with a parent's impulse for safety and control (Kennedy, 2022). Transpersonal Coaching intervenes in this cycle by shifting the parent's focus from the child's behavior to their own physiological and psychological reactivity. Research over the last decade emphasizes that parental behaviors impact a child's development at the biological level, influencing their epigenetic profile and their capacity to manage stress (Boyce, 2018). Boyce (2018) describes two general childhood phenotypes: "dandelions," who are hardy and flourish in most environments, and "orchids," who are highly sensitive to subtle environmental conditions and persistent stress. Good parenting is therefore not universal but must be tailored to the individual child.

When parents operate from an unintegrated "ego-self" trapped in a fight response - manifested by the chronic shouting and weaponized shame reported by 14 of the 16 participants in this study - they risk introducing chronic relational stressors into the home environment. Landmark research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) demonstrates that repeated exposure to household dysfunction and recurrent emotional abuse - including the verbal humiliation, shouting, and weaponized shame observed in this dataset - has a cumulative negative impact on a child's biological, neurological, and physical health outcomes into adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998). Because these traumatic early circumstances alter neuroregulatory development, parents who do not address their own internal landscapes risk harming their children.

Transpersonal Coaching supports the disruption of this intergenerational cycle by fostering parental OA, allowing the coach to guide the parent toward deep self-reflection rather than behavioral reactivity. The neurophysiological effects of OA further explain these reported outcomes. The induction of OA is associated with activating the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps to manage emotional "overwhelm" and prevents a defensive threat response (Siegel, 1999, 2022). This physiological shift is crucial for fostering "affiliative motivation" - the desire for warmth, connection, and care—which is central to Paul Gilbert's (2009) motivational systems. By down-regulating the threat system, Transpersonal Coaching facilitates the activation of the soothing system, making genuine connection and compassionate responses possible. This biological reorientation allows the parent to successfully de-escalate household conflict, establishing a relational baseline of safety that actively protects the child from the chronic stress profiles highlighted in the ACE

framework.

Dängeli (2022) describes a shift toward “eco-logical” leadership, which is characterized by “a sense of interconnectedness and a commitment to the well-being of the whole system” (p.58). With practice, clients were able to view themselves and their child(ren) as partners in a shared developmental process. One parent expressed a sustainable shift in mindset whereby he wholeheartedly expects that “he has a lot to learn from his son”, which has had a profound impact on his “patience and ability to actively listen.”

This study particularly highlighted the power of somatically anchored parts work (Schwartz, 2023; Dangel, 2019) as a mechanism of change with respect to healing shame. It brings an awareness to the link between their child’s behavior and the parent’s own feelings of shame and inadequacy. The internal work of recognizing and unburdening one’s protective parts - like the “She-Hulk” protector driven by a fear of disrespect - allows for greater internal harmony. As Schwartz (2023) posits, outer relationships parallel inner ones; healing the relationship with one’s own vulnerable parts allows the parent to approach the child with "unconditional friendliness", rather than projecting shame or judgment. This compassionate perspective is key to breaking the cycle of shame identified in the data. It effectively clears away a defensive expectations layer that smothers the child's authentic self. Coaching facilitates a disidentification, helping parents see their children as independent parts of the family system as opposed to extensions of their own egos. By healing the relationship between their own internal "parts", a new, internal peace radiates outward, helping create a more harmonious external family system.

Coaches must adhere to stringent professional and ethical safeguarding guidelines for the protection of minors. The primary duty is to the safety of the child, which overrides client confidentiality when abuse or neglect is suspected. Coaches operating in this domain must be explicitly familiar with their jurisdiction's mandatory reporting laws regarding child abuse and neglect.

Limitations

This was a small, self-selected sample of high socio-economic status parents who were spiritually oriented. Longitudinal follow-up was limited given the three-month

timeframe, and there was no control group. I served as both the coach and the qualitative analyst, which presents potential for bias in data interpretation. To address this, analytic decisions were guided by close attention to participants' language and repeated reference to transcripts during theme development. Significant efforts were made to represent participants' reported experiences rather than imposing predetermined theoretical conclusions.

Conclusion

The findings of this report underscore the profound impact of Transpersonal Coaching on the parental population. As Dängeli states, transpersonal coaching helps clients overcome the limiting beliefs, debilitating emotions, and negative reactions that prevent their success and happiness. (Dängeli, 2022, p. 41) For a parent, "success and happiness" are inextricably linked to the well-being of their child.

Through the cultivation of OA, the parents in this study were able to widen their lens of perception, moving from a rivalrous dynamic to a participatory one. They explored the roots of their own shame, neutralized physiological triggers, and realigned their actions with their core values, including "unconditional love" and "safety." Through transpersonal coaching, OA becomes a practical reality that fosters resourcefulness in the parent, and more integrated, authentic, and compassionate generations.

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Supplements

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The Transpersonal Coaching Journal (TCPJ) is an open-access peer-reviewed journal that publishes coaching case study projects conducted by graduates of the one-year Transpersonal Coaching Psychology Certificate Programme at Alef Trust.

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Authors of transpersonal coaching case study reports that have been assessed by the respective trainers and supervisors and considered to be a valuable contribution to the advancement of the coaching field, may be invited to submit their reports for potential publication in the TCPJ.

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