

The Benefits of Productive Struggle



By Eve Menezes Cunningham

Do you remember the story of the caterpillar stuck in the cocoon? The well-meaning human observing it snipped the end of the cocoon to 'help' and in doing so the caterpillar didn't transform into a butterfly. It hadn't been able to develop those essential muscles through the productive struggle of getting out of the cocoon. Instead, its wings weren't able to support it in flight.

When Rainbow MagnifiCat was a kitten, I kept this story in mind several times a day. I delighted in seeing her use the whole of my home (apart from kitchen counters – she was never allowed on them) as her training ground for The Great Outdoors.

I'd heard horror stories of people having to get the fire service out to rescue cats from trees. While I told her I believed in her and was in awe of her, I held back from offering her a lift down from the top of the curtain rails, wardrobe and door frames.

At the time, she wasn't very vocal but would give these teeny mews that I had to resist. I'd explain to her that I wouldn't be there to help her in The Great Outdoors. She needed to trust herself.

Of course, she was fine (and she's a cat so *may* not have understood). But even writing this, years later, I remember how hard it was to not 'help' but to allow her that productive struggle. To build her muscles, spatial awareness and all round awesomeness.

Maybe you find it challenging to allow clients to come to their own realisations? If you employ staff, maybe you find yourself doing what's so natural for you to just do. Instead you might put in the extra effort (short term) to actually train them so they can do it for themselves and make your life easier as well as them growing professionally?

My highlight from the 7th International Conference on Coaching Supervision at Oxford Brookes University was a reminder of this. Keynote speaker Guy Claxton asked if we were



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doing too much for our clients and supervisees (or even staff, children, friends, cats, etc).

Are we inadvertently disempowering clients and loved ones by anticipating their needs? We were reminded of the butterfly story as well as being shown a video of a baby reaching for a toy. She was unable to crawl yet and I was happy watching her move with determination but not ease during the first bit, and I felt a little smug when Claxton paused the video to ask if we'd been tempted to put the toy closer to her. I hadn't been. But when he played more (even though he had said it ended happily), it began to feel torturous.

Donald Winnicott wrote about his own development as an analyst and how it was more deeply satisfying when he was able to be patient, sit back and allow clients to come to their own realisations rather than leaping to interpret things himself. And whether we're with clients or loved ones, it requires patience.

We need to allow ourselves time to support people in struggling productively and building resilience. I remember Teri Hatcher's memoir, *Burnt Toast*, where she talked about mindful parenting and how some days she could be more present with her daughter's discoveries, whereas other days she had to rush her and tie the shoelaces for her. There may be times in business when you need to do something yourself but, for the most part, proper training and development benefits everyone.

Claxton said he'd spoken to heads of counselling services at Oxford and Cambridge universities about the lower resilience students exhibit today compared with 20 years ago. He blamed an education system which disempowers students and leaves them feeling like there's something wrong with them if they don't understand things instantly rather than learning through productive struggle.

I've worked with many clients who've felt it was their fault not understanding the new jobs they found themselves in when someone else might see that they've not had a proper induction to the new role.

In our own practices, there are all sorts of ways in which we can feel the burn of productive struggle.



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Not enough clients?

'When I started, I had such a sense of urgency around getting started, securing clients and earning some money,' remembers Caroline Martin, an executive coach, trainer and facilitator who works mainly with leaders and managers.

'I soon discovered that this urgency wasn't matched by my potential clients. Particularly in terms of corporate clients as opposed to private individuals. There would be meetings and conversations and email exchanges; everything would look green lit to go. There would be radio silence for a while. Then I'd nudge. They'd say, yes they were still interested. We'd ping some dates around. Cue more radio silence for a while.

'Did they really want to go ahead? Or were they just politely fobbing me off? It was hard to know. There were definitely times when frustration – and probably a degree of panic – started to take hold. It was a struggle for me having that level of uncertainty and feeling a sense of it not being in my control because I always felt like I was waiting on others and whether / when they were going to give me a "yes".

'The useful thing for me was in reminding myself that while securing the work with this company was a huge priority for me and my business, for the person I was dealing with in the company it was way lower down their list of priorities. I was basically just sitting somewhere on their to do list.

'My biggest learning and "muscle builder" was probably in practising both patience and perseverance. Hanging in there and following up instead of just thinking, "Oh, they're obviously not interested" and giving up. Accepting that things can be a slow burn. Also, seeing how sometimes a "no" now actually becomes a lovely surprise "yes" somewhere down the line. And somehow ►

- ▶ developing a sense of trust that things will work out because, so far, despite the challenges, they have.'

Personal struggles can become our niche areas

I did not plan to specialise in self-care for mind, body, heart and soul but trained in several different ways of working – from coaching and NLP to counselling, yoga, meditation, crystal therapy, EFT and integrative clinical supervision. My own history meant I was constantly searching for ways to help myself feel better.

A part of me wishes I hadn't had to experience some of the things I went through. Still, I'm grateful that my own productive struggle (especially during those times when staying alive felt beyond my capabilities) means I can now help people work with their whole selves to access their resourcefulness and inner wisdom, making life more enjoyable.

Anxiety and panic attacks helped Lauren Barber, a mentor, health coach and yoga teacher, find her path. 'It started in my early twenties when I first set up my marketing and PR business, and it gradually grew until it peaked around the age of 26. At that point I began to investigate nutrition and well-being tools that I could use. After a few years of beginning to grow stronger and less consumed by anxiety, I re-trained as a health coach and a yoga teacher.

'A combination of exercise and moving my body, finding ways to bring more nature and outdoors into my life, yoga, meditation, nutrition and then more recently a lot of personal mindset work, has led me to where I am now. It was all triggered by my need to manage my own stress and anxiety levels.

'I now support other people in their business and well-being journeys through coaching and mentoring, and without the struggles I faced I would never have come to this place.

'The fact that I have been through stress, burnout and mental health issues, enables me to empathise with others. I share my experiences and learnings from a very real and authentic place. I have learned to be very, very grateful for my anxiety. What I felt at one point was my biggest struggle, has now become one of my biggest strengths.'

Things taking longer than expected?

'All that goal setting advice about setting a deadline frustrated me,' says Barbara Winter, pioneer solopreneur and author of *Making a Living Without a Job: winning ways for the joyfully jobless*.

'I never managed to accomplish something as quickly as I thought I should. When that happened (over and over again), I assumed I was a dreadful failure that was doomed. Then one day, I came to my senses. I thought, "How in the world can I predict how long it will take to accomplish something I've never done before?" I remind myself of that with every new project I begin.

'It led me to realise that entrepreneurs need to master paradox management. We need to be both patient and impatient at the same time. Not an easy assignment, but it may have saved my sanity.'

Next time you notice yourself hooked into that desire to help someone else or wish to be rescued yourself, notice what comes up for you when you reflect on it. Journaling might help. Also, noticing your posture. Do you lean in more when sitting with certain clients? Does it feel like you're leaning away when you're simply sitting up straight?

Being mindful of your body's language will help you explore other ways of supporting them through that productive struggle, holding that space for them to reflect and grow and learn to support themselves. ●



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