In this article, I will be taking some of the fascinating insights we now have about activity in our brains, and relating it to practical experiences from the coaching and leadership development field, specifically looking at how we cope with stress and can learn to develop a greater resilience at work.

Leadership coaching needs to be well equipped in the area of stress, as it is one of the most common drivers for which people seek out – or are sent for – coaching.

At various times, we’ve probably all felt out of control of our emotional responses to things that happen to us at work or we’ve not been able to focus or concentrate on a task, had feelings of being overwhelmed or felt unable to perform at our usual level, and so on. Even reading this might start to cause your stress levels to go up, as I invite you to relive these experiences by bringing your attention to them!

And it’s true, one really interesting finding from neuroscience is that either remembering or imagining an event creates the same biological responses in us as actually experiencing the event first-hand.

Our brain does not differentiate completely between felt, imagined or remembered emotions, which is why positive daydreams can have such an uplifting effect on us, and being fixated on something that troubles us can drive up our biological stress responses.

Our responses to stress developed in our brains at a time when there were very real threats to life out in our everyday environment. We needed to be able to react automatically in the face of wild animals or tribal attacks, and our brains remain much the same today as then.

An evolutionary response

Now, however, the stimuli that create the same stress responses in us are the things people bring to executive coaching, such as a bad relationship with the boss or being furious with the marketing department.

So what can be done to help us manage these sometimes unhelpful reactions and how can coaching contribute?

As we’ve seen, we have the same stress responses to smaller events in the workplace today as we had to life-threatening events in the past. This suggests that we get stressed by our perception of an event, rather than the intrinsic danger of the event itself. Therefore, if we can change our perception of the event, we can change the level of our stress response to it – and so increase our emotional resilience. Coaches can work with their coachees in a number of ways to help this process.
Firstly, we know that if we can experience an event a couple of times without getting stressed by it, we will break the link that triggers a stress response in us when confronted by that particular event. With the help of a coach (or even self-coaching), we can use various techniques to have the experience of the event, without the stress response. For example, we can rehearse a presentation a number of times in a ‘safe’ environment, before delivering it to a real audience. Coaching could support this by helping the individual notice the positive aspects of each rehearsal, the growing feelings of confidence, and the appreciation from the audience.

Successfully completing tasks that have been considered stressful provide us with new memories which reinforce our resilience to new instances of the same task, and there are a number of coaching tools and techniques that can reinforce this progress and ensure it becomes part of our brain’s new neural make-up.

Responding appropriately to challenging situations is part of the process of building resilience, but some people are naturally more resilient to stress than others. The less resilient among us are more likely to have faced long periods of stress that were outside their control, where they couldn’t respond positively to the challenge.

Again, coaching can explore a person’s natural resilience to stress, focusing on personal experiences. Once someone becomes more practised in this way of thinking, their brain will also become much quicker at making these kind of resourcing connections for itself, without the person needing to consciously work through the issue.

Coaching can then be used to increase the levels of positivity someone feels towards various challenges, and build resilience even further.

And watch this space for more insights!

**The Neuroscience of Leadership Coaching**

by Patricia Bossons, Patricia Riddell & Denis Sartain was published in August 2015 by Bloomsbury.