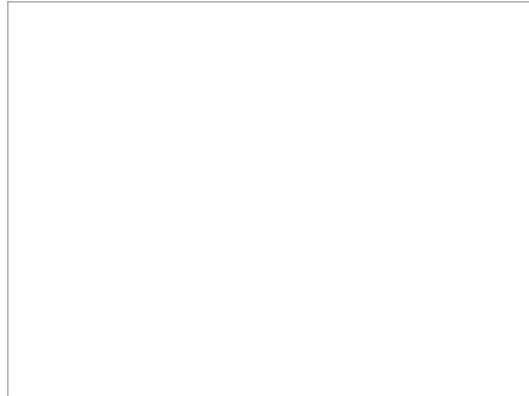


# A New Next

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What will the future hold for our sports coaching? What do we want to take from this deeply unsettling time of disruption into whatever lies beyond it? This post shares some thoughts to stimulate reflections and responses with other coaches – **please contribute by adding a comment at the end of the blog!**

## Back and Forward Futures

Perhaps it's the pedant in me, but I am uneasy with the way one hears the future beyond the current crisis talked about. "Going back to normal" is one of the jarring phrases, as if expecting a return to how things were. "As we emerge" has a similar feel to me, as if all the trauma, the loss and disruption has been a dark tunnel from which, any moment now, we simply step out into the light of a well formed, ordered way of being. And, in this respect, nor does the phrase "new normal" seem to do justice to the faltering, uncertain, stumbling way in which we are likely to feel our way.

Now, I ache for much of my lost former "normal": the day to day contacts, familiar and first time; supporting people in their build up to extraordinary performances at great events or daring to take on new exciting challenges; engaging with young people and adults in our super friendly Tri Club; and the joy of swim teaching with Level Water children. I suspect, though, the journey ahead will be long, painstaking and full of unexpected, difficult and soul-searching turns.

I put something of this concern – of how to avoid the "back to normal" thinking yet conceive a more positive future when it is so very uncertain – to the speakers in a thought provoking webinar organised by the American Association of Applied Sports Psychology. [Dr Kensa Gunter](#) in response came up with the wonderful phrase "new next."

She made the point that because we are familiar with our own version of the old "normal" we tend to slip back in to using it as if it were a default point of reference. This makes me think that we will need to be really conscious and deliberate if we want to shape the "new next", rather than waiting for whatever it might be to emerge around us.

## Sky and Water

Here, the wonderful woodcut by Dutch artist [M.C. Escher](#) illustrates something very important about transitions and change: that going from a way of being in one environment to another involves a phase in which the future can only be seen in very unclear, indistinct outline, like the part-formed shape of birds, imperceptibly metamorphosing into something different but as yet hard to picture.

So what are the outlines of how we want to be as coaches, transitioning into a different, hard to discern world? I think of three defining features of great coaching that I want to take into and make a central part of the "new next". Elements of these features are already making their way into the coaching world, but arguably not yet holding the clear, defining, central place they could now begin to grasp and make their own.

## 1. New Depth

As in the quote from Katherine May, for many the enforced constraints on our previously busy lives lean us toward seeking greater depth – perhaps a reawakened appreciation and gratitude, valuing the quality of what we have rather than the packed-in, busyness and absorption in... whatever it was that seemed so important just a few weeks ago.

“Being busy makes us skim over life like a stone on still water. In quieter times, we can feel the presence of all the things we miss in our hurry.”

Katherine May, The Observer Magazine, 19 April 2020

With those I coach, at the outset of the pandemic we actually increased the amount of contact time – even though for most there's been far less to plan for, report on or prescribe as the major events that we were preparing for were at first held in limbo and then cancelled. Much of our conversations are about wider circumstances and concerns – how their families are, impacts on work and other adjustments. And I've found clients have more of an interest in what is happening for me. Whilst being mindful of boundaries, I feel this closeness – there before but now deepened – gives a greater richness and wholeness in our relationships that I want to nurture now and in the future.

More broadly, imagine if the **quality and depth of relationships** were given greater value and prominence in the way we define great coaching. In many sports we typically think of being a top coach as largely about the depth of technical expertise deployed in working with the very best elite and pro athletes or top teams – with medals and trophies as the ultimate measure of success for coach and coached.

As competitions, events and travel are all on hold, will we give greater value to other aspects of expert caring in coaching that were there before and are now coming to the fore – more to do with relationships founded on **empathy, creativity and support through uncertainty and adversity**? When we look for models of great coaching and cases to learn from, how would it be if we sought out those who are expert or have insightful stories to share about these key qualities and skills, rather than defaulting to those holding prestigious positions coaching elites and pros? It seems to me there is also so much to learn in each of these areas by looking beyond sports coaching to other fields: of caring in action; of creative human expression and endeavour; and of adversity and resilience.

And I believe our measure of success could have more to do with our athletes' **self-belief and transformative experience** – people at all levels surprising themselves with what they can do, making new starts and reaching for new heights, finding new ways of being, perhaps whilst living with adversity and loss – as opposed to podium places, much as these have their special challenges.

## 2. Listening

Another great webinar I've taken part in recently was Empathy in Sport, run by Professor Stephen

Rollnick and Joel Porter ([a recording here](#)). Stephen Rollnick is the co-founder of Motivational Interviewing (MI). A key idea of MI is of “uncluttered empathy” – of listening with a purposeful curiosity, holding back from jumping in with our ready-made, quick fire solutions and instead looking and asking to understand more. This really comes into its own in this time of anxiety-inducing uncertainty and I believe needs to be at the core of shaping the “new next” of coaching.

I’m struck by how unpredictable and fluid our reactions are to all that is happening. One of the coaches I’m in touch with through the Confidence Centred Coaching network said to me all his work has stopped and he now has no income – and at home with his family he was having a wonderful time! At the same time there will be many others, on the face of it in more secure positions, really struggling with an overwhelming anxiety, feeling lost and isolated. Our emotions also flow from one moment to the next: maybe at one point feeling directionless and drained; in another moment a calm, grounding connection with others; then feeling energised with positive intent; and all the way back again. So our coaching interactions, more so than ever, need to start with extra time given to asking how everything is going – un-rushed, attentive “uncluttered empathy” in practice.

And if we want a model of empathy in action, none better than New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern – we have enough models of the opposite to see where that leads us!

“When you think about all the big challenges that we face in the world, (empathy)’s probably the quality we need the most. We need our leaders to be able to empathise with the next generation that we’re making decisions on behalf of. And if we focus only on being seen to be the strongest, most powerful person in the room, then I think we lose what we’re meant to be here for. So I’m proudly focused on empathy, because you can be empathetic and strong.”

Jacinda Ardern, I Know This To Be True, interview with Geoff Blackwell, Guardian 30 May 2020

Moving into our “new next” I believe one of our greatest challenges will be to practise a sensitivity to and deeper understanding of mental health and wellbeing. There is much emerging great practice here already – such as pioneered in the work by [Mind, Time to Change](#), [Rethink Mental Illness](#) and UK Coaching’s own mental health awareness [online course](#) – but again not given the full, central place that I believe could be a defining part of the future of coaching.

What might that look like? I’ve just finished reading Katherine May’s book [Wintering](#). She writes with deep insight of the feeling of disconnection with the rest of the world when something traumatic happens. She describes it as falling through a gap in the mesh of the everyday world to “Somewhere Else” that runs at a different pace. Simply holding in mind that many others will be in a dark “Somewhere Else” – and for long after the inconvenience of restrictions on training and competing are behind us – is certain to change the way we operate as coaches. We don’t need (and shouldn’t try) to be experts in mental health - but we can be experts in the time and attention given to listening, the behaviours we model and the language we use.

So the skills that might define great coaching could be to do with listening with “uncluttered” curiosity, being unafraid to ask and not jump to ready made solutions and showing a resolve to understand and act in pursuit of wellbeing.

### 3. Voice

This last bit might be controversial. A recurrent theme in this post is that we can choose to shape the “new next”. However, as suggested, this will take conscious, concerted effort to hold out for and realise what we believe to be important.

There was much in the taken-for-granted old “normal” that I hope we will make a stand not to get “back to”. The times ahead will not be all blue skies into which everyone can soar. Inequalities and imbalances, restricted opportunities and dismissive them-and-us prejudices that were there before risk being further ingrained. And where will the funding come from for community level initiatives and programmes that have reached out to so many or, close to my heart, for charities like Level Water that fill the gaps?

I think coaches can have an enormously positive impact simply by being aware of how some groups – marginalised before, potentially even more disadvantaged in an uncertain, austere future – need a supportive voice. That may take the form of asking ourselves “who’s missing out?” and being ready to speak up and reach out. Day to day, simple acts of considerate thought, a greater generosity with our time and care for those who might not get it elsewhere, or a stand made against language or behaviour that carries limiting and dismissive assumptions.

This leads me to wonder what a more **vocal and beliefs-driven coaching** would look like in a “new next”. I believe this starts with each one of us going deeper into what drives us, and that way arriving at a clarity in our own voice. As Seattle Sea Hawks Coach and co-founder of [Compete to Create](#), Pete Carroll would emphasise, this means doing the hard work to understand who we really are, our values and the things we believe in. From there at the very least it would make us more alert to when we see or hear things that “just don’t fit” or is demeaning of others, and better prepared to speak out and act. I suspect we will also begin to see more of the in-built, institutionalised biases and skewing of opportunities.

And how would it be if every coach, aspiring to be the best they can be, committed to a cause outside of their normal sphere of coaching? Just one morning or afternoon a week given over to bringing your sport to people who won’t otherwise be reached? If you’re not doing so already, I believe you’ll be surprised at just how much you can learn about yourself, your coaching and about others.

## Hope and Generosity

And so to our final quote from outside of sports coaching, from the author and contemporary historian [Rebecca Solnit](#). This takes us full circle to where we came in. She points to the richness of acts of kindness and caring that have blossomed in the pandemic as something precious to hold on to – neighbours looking out for others, people delivering food and other essentials to those in lockdown, others making all manner of protective kit for front line staff and much more.

“I believe the generosity and solidarity in action in the present moment offers a foreshadowing of what is possible – and necessary. The basic generosity and empathy of most ordinary people should be regarded as a treasure, a light and an energy source that can drive a better society, if it is recognised and encouraged....

What I have seen after earlier disasters is that a lot of people aspire to “go home” and “back to normal”, but some find in the moment a sense of self and a sense of connection so meaningful that something about who they were and what they did in the crisis carries forward into how they live the rest of their life.”

Rebecca Solnit, *The Way We Get Through This Is Together*. The Guardian 14 May 2020]

How amazing it would be if, through seeking greater depth in our coaching relationships, in the skilled empathy we practise and the voice and space we give to others who typically aren’t heard, sports coaches came to be seen as models of how to make a difference in the “new next.”

You can read some of the thought provoking and powerful articles and books here:

- Katherine May: [Living in our isolation bubbles can bring great rewards](#) and her book [Wintering](#)
- Rebecca Solnit: [The way we get through this is together](#)
- Stephen Rollnick (and others) [Motivational Interviewing in Sport](#)

And if you feel inspired, Level Water are calling out for donations to keep the one to one swimming lessons for children with disabilities going in the absence of fundraising from big, cancelled events. [Click here](#) to take a look at how you can help.

**Please leave your reflections and thoughts in the comment box below – it would be great to understand what you and other coaches see as the defining features of great coaching in a future we can shape together.**

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