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The Eight Tensions Framework: a road map for coaches working with undergraduates

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Following an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of 14 students who received one-to-one coaching over one or two years, we formulated a list of eight tensions which the undergraduates experienced at university. These have been expounded in the Eight Tensions Framework, which is a roadmap for coaches and their student clients, for whom coaching at university may be uncharted terrain. The use of tensions highlights how it is not unusual for life to be fraught with tensions. The position taken on them will vary according to which areas of life they are applied, when they are applied over the undergraduates' degree and how the individual changes. Examples from the data are given to show how these tensions manifested for the students in our sample. Detailed strategies, techniques and examples of how the tensions might be applied in coaching sessions are given, including using them in scaling and 'wheel of life' exercises. The transferability of the model to other student populations is discussed. Finally, we highlight links between the Eight Tensions Framework and existential psychology.

Keywords: *Coaching; university, model, framework, personal development, student, higher education, existential psychology.*

Introduction

In an earlier paper (Lancer & Eatough, 2018) we offered an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the experience of nine undergraduates at a UK university who had six sessions of one-to-one coaching with professional coaches over the course of an academic year. This paper broadens the analysis to incorporate a total of 14 students who had coaching either over one (six sessions) or two years (12 sessions), depending on their personal preference. The methods were described in the earlier paper. Briefly, the students were interviewed about their coaching experience, how they made sense of university life and their personal growth. Semi-structured interviews were used at regular intervals such that students who took part over one year, had four interviews and students who took part over two years had five interviews. When the data were analysed using IPA, the researchers found that several broader threads or tensions surfaced across the whole data set. These were formulated as a road map, the Eight Tensions Framework (see Figure 1) to help those coaches who may be more used to coaching in the corporate sector become acquainted with issues that undergraduates experience. It also serves as a road map for students, as many students in our study reported being unsure about what sort of issues to bring to a coaching session, and thus the framework could be a good starting point. Of course, students may present with other issues as well, but this represents a starting point for coaches to get acquainted with common challenges. Furthermore, maps help put issues in perspective, as they highlight what issues are being neglected.

The Eight Tension Framework

It is common for coaches to share their tools with clients. Coaches may like to share the model at the beginning of a session with the student or refer to it once a student has articulated an issue. We hope students and coaches will find the tension labels relatable and

the diagram and concept to be user-friendly. Indeed, we have detailed various ways of using these tensions in practice, such as using them as part of a scaling or ‘wheel of life’ exercise. In Figure 1, it can be seen that each of the eight tensions contain an equilibrium sign (\rightleftharpoons) which indicates that it is not a question of picking a side of the tension and it being ‘dealt with’ once and for all. Rather, a state of balance is required between the continuing processes represented by each end of the tension. The tensions are on a continuum and people will move back and forth along them. They will need to be rebalanced at various points in the undergraduate’s time at university and beyond as circumstances and individuals change. Thus the tensions are dynamic and flexible.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

We have framed the issues faced by the students as tensions, underscoring the challenges inherent in living. Indeed, one aim of the model is to highlight to students that it is not unusual for life to be full of tensions. By realising they are experiencing a particular tension, students can gain some perspective and look in either direction to see which position they could adopt to become a better liver of their life at that moment in time. It must be emphasised that neither side of the tension is inherently positive or negative. Furthermore, the way the tensions are lived on the ground by each student will be highly individualised. The tensions are not fixed and may be added to or changed according to the client-coach situation.

Achieving a middling position is not the point of the tensions and the challenges cannot be solved once and for all. Rather, the task is to acknowledge the tensions exist and for coaches to help students realistically face those tensions, making deliberate choices about where they want to be on them, and to support them in coming up with ways to get there. This realistic approach acknowledges that there are ‘trade-offs’ for every position taken, meaning we may have ambivalent feelings and emotions about a place on the tension as, inevitably, we give up something when we take a particular position. As Cooper says, “You

cannot have it all. Get one thing you want and, by the very nature of existence, you will be losing out on something else you desire” (2015, p. 121). However, van Deurzen (2015) sees these potentially upsetting losses as valuable as by embracing all aspects of life, positive and negative, we can more deeply understand our possibilities and evaluate our choices.

In what follows, each of the tensions are explained with examples from the study using pseudonyms. Practical ways for coaches to use the tensions with their student clients are offered.

Narrowing down ⇌ Opening up

Throughout life as an undergraduate, there were times when the students were really focussed, such as when working on a dissertation or practising rowing. There were other times when they were ‘opening up’ to everything going on around them, such as attending debates and events, responding to advertisements for jobs or being exposed to issues that they had not noticed before, such as homelessness.

An example from the data of ‘narrowing down’ is:

If I can somehow streamline my interests I think my approach this year is like filtering and getting out of the way. You can learn forever; there’s a forever thing. Yes, there’s so many things that are amazing and interesting to learn about, but you really need to pick and decide what interests you most and put those building blocks first. Now I feel that my biggest maybe issue is learning to prioritise because yes, prioritising is hard if everything is really interconnected. (Talía)

Talía had an agenda of wanting to ‘narrow down’. However, another student, Rami, was aware that he was opening up’:

...developing an understanding of the world around me, and just being continuously curious and looking into it and always wanting to learn. (Rami)

Like all positions in this framework, ‘narrowing down’ and ‘opening up’ are not traits, i.e., it is not the case that someone is a ‘narrowing down’ or an ‘opening up’ type of person. Rather, we occupy both positions at different times and in different situations.

Being in a ‘narrowing down’ phase is useful when you want to be focussed and get stuff done. However, if we are always focused, we could miss out on opening up to what is going on and what is new which might be more interesting to us than the things we already know about. In other words, we would be shutting down options. However, if we are always opening up to what is new, we would never knuckle down to focus on something and we would feel unmoored. Neither side of this tension is more positive or more negative than the other, they just are.

One way of working with these tensions is to use them as a scale (see Box 1). Note that although we have used the Narrowing down \rightleftharpoons Opening up tension as an example, in fact, a scale could be used with each tension similarly. The tensions could also be applied to a ‘wheel of life’ exercise. This can be used in at least two ways. Firstly, the student could label the segments of the wheel of life circle with different aspects of their life, such as study, work, friends, family or even expand on one of these, such as ‘study’, and drill down into different topics or components of study. With regards to a specific tension, such as Narrowing down \rightleftharpoons Opening up, the student could rate where they are on the tension for each segment, perhaps by giving them a score out of ten, where one is one end of the tension and ten is the other end. Shading the circle according to the score will give a visual representation of the student’s current situation and could indicate in which aspects of life further consideration of this tension could be encouraged. Secondly, all eight of the tensions could be used as segments of the circle on a single ‘wheel of life’ diagram which represents a particular aspect of the student’s life. Again, assigning each one a number out of ten and shading the segment accordingly would give a visual snapshot of where the student is

currently. This could be used to discuss what, if any, changes they would like to effect and which tensions they might have neglected, perhaps unintentionally, and would like to explore further. Thus, the Eight Tensions Framework can be used flexibly to help students navigate their lives.

[INSERT BOX 1 HERE]

As well as these specific techniques, coaches can work with the tensions by referring to them in the coaching session in a less structured, and more conversational way. For this current tension, coaches can help students think about whether they would like to ‘open out’ or ‘narrow down’. Students may tend towards one side or another, depending on where they are in the academic year or which year they are in. For example, when they are writing a dissertation or revising for examinations, they may enter a narrowing down phase. Once this has been established, coaches can share prioritisation strategies or help the student brainstorm opportunities with which to get involved. Coaches can help students realistically assess these, for example, by considering which societies are currently operating and whether there is some test of participation, such as an audition. If possibilities foreclose, coaches can help students make the most of other viable opportunities.

By helping their clients consider if they are in an ‘opening up’ or ‘narrowing down’ phase, the coach is helping the coachee have insight into their lives which means they can make decisions about whether they want to move towards a different position with their eyes open.

Treading water ⇌ Pushing forward

There were times when the students expressed wanting to actively push forward and take themselves out of their comfort zone doing something different. For instance, one student, Martin, when filling in an end of year review with his tutor, realised he had not done that much over the year; he felt stagnant. This prompted him to try a whole suite of new activities

from directing a film and creating TV shows to trying a different way of approaching his essays and opening up to his friends.

On the other hand, there were students who wanted to maintain the status quo as just fulfilling their current responsibilities took all their energy. In fact, when treading water in a swimming pool, for example, you are not actually standing still; it is still a dynamic position. You have to move your arms and legs a lot when you tread water, otherwise you would sink. It might be that treading water is a more reflective time when you are catching up with yourself and processing what is going on or it may be a question of pacing yourself and not trying to do everything all at once. One student, Natasha, specifically articulated this:

I just wanted to fast track 'uni'. I want to be situated in my career, have all that, have it all sorted. If it wasn't that then I wanted to be top of the class, in all these societies, with a job, have everything I wanted at that moment instead of taking it one step at a time, and realising what I could manage in my life and what I couldn't. (Natasha)

She felt comforted that she had three years to do what she wanted and could take things at a slower pace. Natasha learned with the help of her coach that not doing everything at the same time does not mean she was failing in some way.

People cannot always push ahead in multiple areas as this will eventually lead to burn out and students worked out that they had to learn to rest or re-group as one student, Ryan, described:

Yeah and I kind of understand how to take the load off and like kick back and do what I want to do like I'm okay with now watching TV and playing guitar for two hours or something because I know that I've done what I need to do in the day.

(Ryan)

There may be good reasons for 'treading water'. We cannot forge ahead in all aspects of life, as various choices vie for our limited attention. Some domains may require 'treading water'

to provide enough energy for forging ahead in others. Furthermore, 'treading water' may mean doing the activities you are doing and not taking on any more while you consolidate your position or achieve "lateral growth" (Perry, 1970, p. 178), building up proficiencies, stamina and stability in a particular area. Sometimes, 'treading water' is synonymous with self-care, to avoid burn out and exhaustion, described by students as feeling "drained" (Rami) or "ill" (Hermione). 'Treading water' allows us to recuperate. Furthermore, in states of relaxation, or at least "the transition between work and relaxation" (May, 1975/1994, p. 62), people can get their most creative ideas. Schneider supports this and attributes other benefits to pausing, which is another form of 'treading water'; "when we pause, much emerges that otherwise gets lost – memory, imagination, possibility" (Schneider, 1999, p. 8). Schneider (1999) suggests that these factors are necessary for us to thrive. Thus 'treading water' holds much positive value.

There is a time for both pushing forward and treading water. The point is that the coach can help the client recognise where they are and consider whether they want to be in that state, or in that state to that extent. It might be that the client lost sight of the fact that were not fulfilling their aim for the year of tackling a big project and were unwittingly treading water, for example. Similarly, if a client is feeling exhausted, a coach can help them consider how to rein in some of their activities and re-group.

Coaches can help students consider in which domains to push forward and different ways of doing so. They can underscore that we cannot and do not need to push forward in all domains at the same time as we will burn out. They can discuss the symptoms of burn out and help students strategise how to pre-empt it by carving out time for relaxation. Coaches can explain that there is a place for both 'treading water' and 'pushing forward' and can help students privilege one or the other according to the situation. Stagnation may be a wake-up call to take action and coaches can help students find a domain in which to do so.

Owned action ⇒ Absorption in mass of ideas

When the students were at university, there were many ideas circulating. Keying into these circulating ideas is important to know what is going on in the world and to be part of the world. One student, Ryan, demonstrated this as he was encouraged to think about deep issues as he was influenced by his peers going on protest marches. Therefore, following the crowd exposed him to activism, which he could then make his own as he saw fit. On the other hand, another student, Helen, described the meaninglessness of adopting positions because others did. She felt that her peers held fixed political opinions such as Marxism, without questioning what this meant, “absorb[ing] their opinions from other sources, and just adopt[ing] them as their own” (Helen). She asked herself what being a Marxist would actually mean in her life and found they were incongruent with what she thought about life.

‘Owned action’ is taking a position in how you want to live and owning it, based on your own informed opinion, which might stem from elements of the mass of ideas, but it not a blind following of the crowd. An example of this owned action is when a student, Sarah, learned about farming on her course, and decided she could not subscribe to the farming industry’s ethics, consequently becoming vegetarian. However, taking too much ‘owned action’ might result in being an echo chamber of your own ideas which might become outdated or not relevant out the current world. Furthermore, it may take time for ideas to be fully owned, as Ryan illustrated. He was in a middle position in which he became aware of homelessness and was considering taking action by giving a sandwich to a homeless person, but it was unclear whether he actually took action or not.

Coaches can encourage students to immerse themselves in the swirling mass of ideas at university. They can help students evaluate which ideas have meaning for them and therefore want to make their own and help them engage in ways that work for them. Coaches can underscore that the ideas students want to ‘own’ will naturally change as they do.

Students can experiment and, importantly, make decisions about what matters to them, as there are no absolute meanings, rather than let the masses sweep them along and decide for them.

Being you ⇌ Fitting in

When the students started university, they found that while they were exploring friendship groups, they had to fit in to an extent, to get to know people. People, perhaps particularly young people, want to fit in and feel a part of something (Tillich, 1952). They felt they had to go with what others were doing, such as going to night clubs they did not enjoy when they would rather stay at home and have a quieter evening.

There are positive effects of fitting in. For instance, Holly's natural state as a self-proclaimed "loner" was disrupted when her friend confronted her about not going out much. He encouraged her to fit in more and go out with her peers. Holly followed her friend's suggestion and found it worked for her.

After settling in at university, some students felt more able to be themselves and not acquiesce with the group. Ryan opted to be further along on the 'Being you' end of the tension:

There was like a lot of people have taken it like two ways, either people either like me now or don't like me sort of thing cause I'm a bit more sort of like 'here's my personality – deal with it!' sort of thing [...] it's fine because in the same way there are people going away, there are people coming and being sort of closer to me which is nice. (Ryan)

This illustrates another element of these tensions, namely, that there are always consequences and trade-offs to any position taken. If you want to go out and be completely you, then you might lose some friends at the same time as gaining closer friends. As a coach we can alert

our clients to the idea of such consequences and help our clients think through if they are willing to accept them.

In another case, a student, Helen, was told by her peers that she was too 'her'. She was told by her tutors and classmates that she was too "honest" (Helen) in what she said, which was one of her core values. This resulted in her not contributing to class, although she was "not like that" (Helen). In the event, she adopted a behaviour that felt unaligned with how she wanted to behave in order to have better relationships. This illustrates a trade-off as Helen felt it was more important to have easier relationships, as she had felt "isolated" and "lonely" in her first year.

In the best-case scenario, students could be themselves and fit in with the group – the group accommodated different personalities. Natasha found that she could do this:

I'm actually quite interested in MMA which is Mixed Martial Arts fighting. I've got quite a few interests and it's only realising now that it's okay to be weird and have these different interests than other people. People at uni don't really care which is great, but I realise that I don't have to be a certain person to have friends or be accepted by people. I can just be me. I'm still trying to figure out who that is, but I'm not being something I'm not anymore. (Natasha)

This also illustrates that finding out who 'you' are is not clear cut and can take a long time. Thus, despite how the tension may first appear, 'being you' is not always easy or straight forward.

As with other tensions, it is necessary to pinpoint the situation you are discussing with the coaches as they may take different positions on the tension depending on the situation they are in or can create a synthesis, in which both aspects can be achieved simultaneously.

Coaches can explore with their clients whether they wish to express more of themselves than they currently do. If so, they can help students confront the trade-offs in that

position, as well as how to express themselves. Coaches could help students think about the trade-offs and benefits of fitting into different groups. Some students may be lucky enough to be able to be themselves within a group. However, being yourself in a group can take courage. Coaches can help students muster the confidence to do this.

Connection ⇌ Separation

There were times when the students wanted to separate from people in their lives, and times when they wanted to forge connections. Their friendships were very malleable. For example, one student, Talia, broke up with her boyfriend so she could concentrate on her work and Ryan sought connections realising “you have to sort of go on your own initiative and make friends” which he did by finding points of connection with people he met at parties:

One of the guys is into like music production and stuff, he likes making hip hop songs and stuff like that. I do that too, so I thought you know we’ll just do it together, so I invited him over for a couple of nights of that and then we all really like a lot of TV shows similar so we started watching all those together and movies, we all have a similar taste in movies so, yeah. (Ryan)

Even jettisoned friendships could be rekindled which underscores the dynamic nature of this and all the tensions. For instance, Sarah made a conscious decision to separate from her old school friend and instead force herself to make new friends at university. However, she was soon in “constant contact” (Sarah) with her old friend, demonstrating how friendships could be reignited.

This tension can also be interpreted in terms of the students’ academic studies. For example, once Martin connected his work with being creative, with the aid of his coach, he enjoyed essays more, putting more of ‘himself’ into them. Separation in work involved the breaking up of big assignments into separate chunks to make it more manageable.

Thus both sides of this tension could be adopted in different domains of university life. Positions of connection and separation could be applied to different relationships and could change within a relationship, illustrating the dynamism of this tension, typical of all the tensions.

Coaches can help students think about the aspects of university that may benefit from connection and separation, such as creativity and essays, exemplified by Martin, and breaking work down into bounded sections. In terms of relationships, coaches can help students decide if there are friendships they would like to develop. Students can discuss unhealthy relationships with their coaches, and weigh up the best course of action, such as trying to change them or shut them down. Finally, coaches could share that this tension is dynamic, and that closed down friendships may be rekindled whilst existing friendships may be closed down or put on hold.

Day to day ⇌ Thinking forward

Sometimes the students thought more about the present and at other times about their future lives. If we think forward all the time, our ambitions can become pipedreams as due to not taking any day-to-day action to make them happen, they become unrealistic. One student, Rami, discussed how his coach helped him turn his aspirations into realistic possibilities:

It wasn't a bunch of hypotheticals. It was sort of like, "Okay, so let's find real-world applications for what I want to do." So, even something as small as, "Choose four internships," or "Choose four publishers," that is a big step. (Rami)

We have to do the day-to-day donkey work in order to make these future goals happen. However, if we are not at all focused on the future, the day-to-day work becomes mundane, irrelevant and meaningless to the student's life. However, when the students did have an eye to the future then the day-to-day work seemed significant and they were more motivated, which Talia illustrates:

You know I don't really want to sit and read about taxonomy of species but I'm going to do it because I see that next week I've got a field class where I will be looking at these species and by the end of the month there'll be a report I have to write on this and by the end of the year I'll have a dissertation topic and maybe can feed into that, and seeing those steps. (Talía)

Students who wanted to get more on the day-to-day end of the tension, found it was helpful to adopt a study routine that worked for them which they worked out with their coaches' support. For example, Sarah made changes to her routine to ensure it was productive for her, such as taking breaks every two hours by going for a walk. She was aware that these seemingly small everyday decisions were important for achieving her goals and thus managed to synthesise the day to day and the future:

...the bigger picture is like the goal and like step by step of how to achieve that goal and the smaller picture is like the everyday how to be productive every single day so that you are working towards the bigger goal. And then the everyday, the smaller picture adds up to the bigger picture and then you achieve whatever you want to achieve. (Sarah)

Coaches can discuss with their clients if it is preferable to focus on the day to day or the future, or a synthesis of the two, helping them make connections between the present and the future. For example, if students have future examinations to study for, coaches could guide them in breaking their goals down into daily, step by step tasks. They could also support them in thinking about their futures and what they want to achieve, helping them not be restricted by the past and to be realistic about the future.

Fixed plans ⇒ Fluidity of life

Many students seemed to hold fix ideas, such as about how to enter a particularly industry. They seemed to think there was a fixed route to where they wanted to get to. However, this

can be an unhelpful mode of thinking as our fixed ideas may be wrong or things may not go to plan. For instance, Martin had a false idea thought it was much harder to get into the television industry than he later believed, and this meant he applied for some positions that he would not have done otherwise. By changing their outlook to be more fluid, the students were able to take advantage of opportunities that presented themselves. For example, although Helen thought she had planned out what modules she wanted to take in her third year at university, in fact, she later realised that there were attractive modules available which she had not known about.

However, it is important to have a plan, even with the contingency that it may not transpire in the way you thought or we may change our mind, as this helps us to be rooted and at least have the possibility of achieving what we want to achieve. Rami exemplified this as he had an initial plan to be either a lawyer or a teacher. This was radically reviewed as he then decided to be an academic, illustrating that these initial ‘commitments’ are not fixed. Rami did not seem phased that his initial ideas were “pretty much as far off the table as it can be without being on the floor” (Rami). Thus our decisions are not immutable and we are always changing. As young people work out their preferences and change, they can try possibilities and explore options. Thus, even seemingly fixed plans are contingent.

The current pandemic has shown us that you can plan, for example, to go abroad, but unforeseen obstacles may appear to derail us. This necessitates us to be open to alternative pathways. It can also alert us to think of ways to mitigate the effects of such fluidity. For instance, one student, Zara, lost her mobile phone which prompted her to consider how she could pre-empt such setbacks. She then backed up her work, which was helpful, as she subsequently lost her laptop. Accepting that life is unpredictable can help us take action and embrace uncertainty head-on.

However, some actions are better without a fixed plan. Sarah tried to plan a way to become more sociable:

We spoke about, in terms of work, how we need to like plan stuff. I think what was more important was in terms of social stuff, she said that I should just go with the flow and not think about it too much and I think that definitely helped. I think in social situations when you think too much, you have like expectations and stuff like that and it might not blow you away. Whereas if you just go along with it, I think it just falls into place. (Sarah)

Taking an organic rather than planned approach was more conducive to social development, although work benefited from a day-to-day plan. Therefore, some life domains do not seem to be amenable to being moulded into fixed plans.

Coaches can assist students in identifying areas in which they can be pro-active to reduce risk. Coaches can help students make plans and then decide which plans can more fixed and which can be more fluid. They can encourage students to find ways to test and re-evaluate their plans, such as doing work experience, highlighting that it is human to change our mind. Situations also change, which is out of our control, extinguishing some possibilities and forcing us to explore others. We need flexible plans so that we are open to taking advantage of new possibilities. Coaches can help students acknowledge that plans can change is a more realistic way to live and this can be a positive way to see the world as it means nothing is fixed.

Doing enough ⇒ Going all in

Sometimes the students wanted to throw themselves into their work. For example, Lynn thought she had not realised her full potential in the previous year at university and resolved to go all in to her degree that year. On the other hand, Talia was not able to go all in to her work in the way that she wanted. She was introduced to a computer programme and wanted

to learn programming. However, her course did not allow time for this. The danger of going all in to the programming was that she spent less time on other aspects of her work that she needed to pass her degree. She thus had to stifle her desire to go all in and therefore had to do enough to get by. We do not live in isolation, rather we live in a context. Talia was subject to the requirements of her degree and since she wanted a degree, she had to adopt the 'doing enough' end of the tension. Ryan felt he was not interested enough in his subject to go all in but he was able to go all in to his music and invested a lot of time and energy raising the profile of his band. This shows how it is possible to go all in in some areas of life and not in others.

It is possible to help yourself 'go all in' by taking some kind of action. Rami had felt that while he was with his tutees, he was 70% focused on them and 30% worrying about his work, and vice versa; he was never able to give 100% to what he was doing. However, when he scheduled his time effectively, he was able to focus on the activity at hand and 'go all in'.

To get back to the 'going all in' side of the tension, Martin, who loved creative pursuits, but felt he was just going through the motions with his essay writing, made an active decision to see how "being creative in my free time can influence [his essays], putting more me into my essays for example". By reframing his essays more creatively, he was able to 'go all in'.

Coaches can help students consider in which domains they are 'going all in' or 'doing enough'. Students can decide if they are happy with the status quo and coaches can help them think creatively and pragmatically about how to increase that alignment in other areas. They can help students apportion their time effectively so that they can generate more time to 'go all in' in the areas that they want to.

Coaches can reinforce that it is natural for interests to change and students can change their mind about in what to 'go all in' or 'do enough'. They can support students in adopting

strategies to ‘do enough’ in cases where it is necessary to persist at something for a greater goal, even when the students do not feel aligned to it. Coaches can underscore to students that it is natural to feel ‘all in’ in some areas or times of life and not in others. Coaches should not be afraid to be clear that, in reality, there are limitations on our life, for example, rules and regulations of institutions by which we may want to abide to get a degree. They can help students make informed decisions on how to respond to those situations in which we experience unwanted limitations; whether we quit them completely, find something of value in them, or carry on in a more muted way.

Conclusion

Although we have developed these tensions from the analytic work of a small number of students, we argue that these are potentially useful for students beyond our sample.

Employing Kvale’s (1996) notion of “analytical generalization” (p. 233), we encourage readers, who may be coaches, coaching psychologists, university staff and academic researchers, to reflect on whether the Eight Tensions Framework holds for their contexts. This “professional resonance” lends support to our claim of generalisability (Lancer & Eatough, 2018) or at least “transferability” (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015, p. 176).

It is our intention to foreground the idea that the clients have choices in how they live their life. We take an existential psychological standpoint (Jacobsen, 2007) and have adopted the view that personal growth means to become a better liver of life, rather than an increase in, for example, happiness or another measure. In terms of the Eight Tension Framework, growth means the client acknowledges they are on the tension, actively make decisions about where they want to be on it and take small steps to realise these, knowing that neither side is inherently positive or negative. Thus they are encouraged to live life deliberately which is the hallmark of existential psychology (Jacobsen, 2007). The Eight Tensions Framework

underscores this diagrammatically as it invites clients to think about where they are on the tension. A second paper which expands on the existential underpinnings of the Eight Tensions Framework is in preparation.

We do not advise trying to go through each tension in one coaching session. Rather, each one could form the core of a coaching session. After the coaching sessions have ended, the client could repeat some of the scaling exercises periodically, perhaps once a term or during a period of change, in order to check in with themselves.

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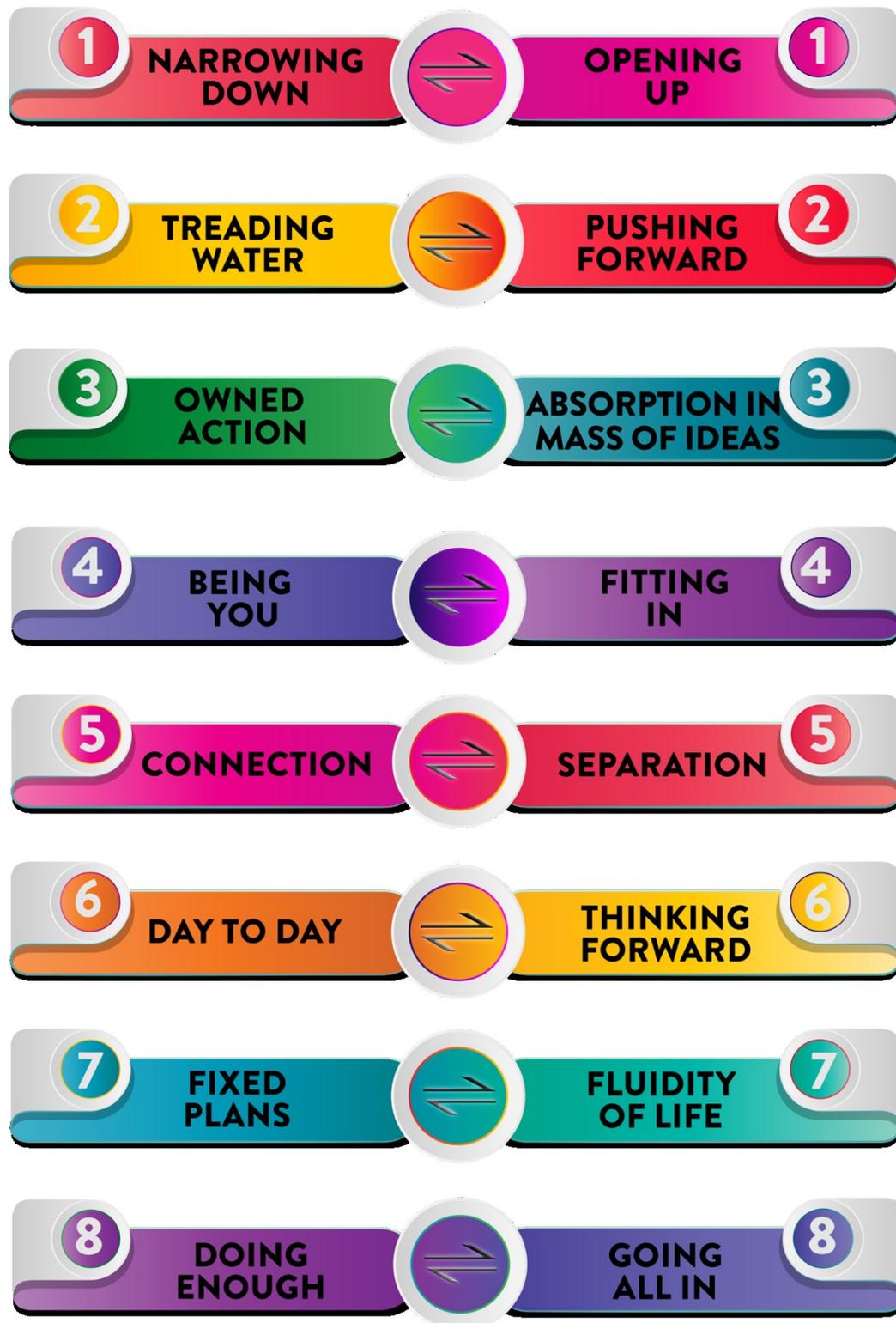
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FIGURE 1: DIAGRAM OF THE EIGHT TENSIONS FRAMEWORK



Box 1: Example of using Narrowing down \rightleftharpoons Opening up as a scale

Coach: Thinking of the aspect of your life that you want to work on, what I want you to do is to mark an 'x' on the Narrowing down \rightleftharpoons Opening up axis, where you think you are now. Are you in a focussed phase or are you exploring things you are curious about and generally opening up to what's 'out there'?

**NARROWING
DOWN**

**OPENING
UP**



Coachee marks on the axis.

Coach: Now I want you to answer "Am I happy with where I am now? Does it feel right? Do I want to be more focused on something or more opening up?". Perhaps you feel you have accepted the first thing that has come up without looking what else is out there? Or are you spending far too much time exploring and not actually applying yourself to one thing?

If you are happy with where you are now, you don't need to do anything else for this tension. However, you might want to reset the equilibrium so you are in a more opening up phase, for example.

So, where would you like to be on this tension?

In another colour, mark this position with an 'x'.

Client marks on the axis again.

Coach: What small steps could you take to go in the direction you want to be?

The coach helps the student to think about possible options.

This type of scaling exercise can be applied to all the tensions.