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# Developing Leadership Resilience Through a Sense of Coherence

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## Abstract

Leadership resilience is something that is accrued through experience. Becoming resilient necessarily involves the negative side of leadership and is one in which the leader often manifests symptoms of work-induced stress. When in this space, the leader often feels isolated, and the voice of the leader is quietened as few leaders are able to say they are afraid. This case study provides insight into one leader's journey, during which he was able to find his voice. In so doing he developed a sense of coherence, which enabled the leadership episode to become part of a broader narrative. The process was facilitated through a coaching relationship, one in which a resilience and Salutogenic model/process and interpretative phenomenological analysis was utilised.

**Keywords:** leadership, resilience, salutogenesis, sense of coherence, organisational change

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## 1. Introduction

This study explored ways in which to foster resilient leadership through the development of an emerging situational 'sense of coherence' (SoC) [1, 2], and a subjective self-expression of salutogenesis [3]. Salutogenesis is the seminal work of Antonovsky [1], a renowned medical sociologist. The Salutogenic approach veers away from addressing perceived deficits, either in the person or the environment. Instead it shifts the gaze to a strengths-based approach to becoming resilient, an approach that is familiar to coaching practice. The Salutogenic model Antonovsky developed has two key components, one is the SoC and the other is generalised resistance resources (GRRs). Antonovsky discovered that if people were able to develop an enduring SoC, they were able to survive stressful situations much better than their counterparts [1, 2]. GRRs are all of the resources available to any of us at a given time, and help us to overcome life's challenges. Antonovsky realised that when people utilised their GRRs it

contributed to their resilience and enhanced their SoC. For the purposes of the study, resilient leadership was determined using Antonovsky's SoC theories of comprehension, management and meaning [1].

The workplace context in which the study took place was one of profound organisational change, and highlights the challenges faced leading an organisation during a time of restructuring and reducing resources. The study discusses the experiential process undertaken through a leadership coaching relationship, facilitated through a resilience and well-being coaching model [4, 5]. The model and process were designed to enable individuals and teams to make sense of a stressful workplace environment, and develop their resilience to workplace stressors. This is made possible in part through the capture of personal data using a resilience pathway [5] that remains sterile until it is subjected to interpretation defined by human experience [5]. Interpreting the pathway means becoming sensitive to workplace symptoms of ill health and lowered well-being, (such as burnout, fatigue, malaise, depression, defensiveness and cynicism), which are as important as noticing a sense of purpose, esteem and motivation, and enable leaders to become proactive about managing workplace resilience.

The experience of leading through change can challenge the resilience of those in leadership roles, not least because there is an expectation, that the leader will have solutions to ease the turmoil of organisational change, and, that they as leaders will not succumb to burnout. The expectation is as much with the leader as with those following; it can therefore be demoralising when the leader stumbles, and it is here where coaching can help leaders regain traction and a sense of direction.

Within a leadership coaching relationship, the coach facilitates a process where the direction of travel includes celebrating even small successes (personal and organisational), and supports the coachee to develop independent resilience skills that will have a long-lasting positive impact. Being a resilient leader is less about bouncing *forward* out of a situation. It is about inculcating a dynamic way of thinking, one that enables the leader to either manage a current issue in the same way but for a longer period of time, and/or through experience, find a workable solution that had become obscured from view. Leadership that incorporates a Salutogenic approach values adaptation to changing circumstances, the reframing of situations to incorporate realistic and positive perspectives, and developing the ability to take something constructive from *all* learning experiences.

## 2. The study

The study was facilitated through a leadership coaching relationship, contracted between the author (researcher/coach) and a senior executive manager (SEM) (coachee). The SEM had day-to-day leadership and management responsibility of a U.K. national charitable organisation, and was tasked by the executive board with delivering a change agenda that included delivering an improved service with fewer resources. Scrutiny of the SEM performance by the executive board was intense but supportive. A developmental leadership programme was already being provided to all SEMs, but this was not addressing workplace stress.

The provision of resilience and well-being coaching to the SEM was intended to augment and align to existing provision [6].

Workplace coaching is a known OD/L intervention [7] and can enable individuals or teams to feel a greater sense of connection, commitment and collaboration [8, 9]. By itself, coaching is known to enhance leadership styles [10] and forms core components of many leadership development programmes. Coaching is also known to reduce stress and improve resilience [11–13], both of which are important during times of organisational transition [14]. Being resilient means not just recovering from setbacks, but learning from them, and using them to significant advantage [15]. Resilience can take a variety of forms [16]; however, having a positive mindset, which is inculcated through coaching, is a contributory factor in resilience development [11, 17]. Another significant advantage of coaching is that the positive effects of coaching are long lasting [7, 18], partially because coaching is known to facilitate a deep form of learning through neurological changes [5, 18]. The resilience and well-being model used in this study was designed to bring about deep learning experiences [18, 19] through the development of a resilient positive mindset [20, 21].

## 2.1. Study design

### 2.1.1. Methodology

The methodology chosen for the study was that of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) [22], selected partially because it facilitates the process whereby sense is made of the phenomena under study [22, 23]. In this instance the sense making process was applied to develop an understanding of leadership resilience, and was reliant on the contribution of both the coach (researcher) and coachee (SEM). Within IPA, the researcher's role incorporates one that strives to make sense of the participant's sense making, and in this way is one that lends itself readily to the multi-faceted role that the researcher and coach inhabit. In order to gain a meaningful understanding of the lived experience, IPA utilises the knowledge of the researcher as an interpretative lens, so that researcher bias is identified and removed, the 'lens' is laid bare [24] and open to scrutiny throughout.

IPA values the voice of human experience, and resonates with coaching practice [25], which brings people to a place where they can find their voice again. The idiographic aspect of IPA [22] is actioned through the coaching/research process; a process which surfaces descriptions of leadership resilience as experienced by the coachee, and is made sense of within the coaching relationship [26].

### 2.1.2. Method

The method chosen for the study is one that aligns with IPA and is an in-depth reflective case study [27]. As a purposeful sample [28] of one single case, it is representative of a senior leader experiencing and leading organisational change. Participation was facilitated through a one-to-one coaching relationship, utilising the resilience and well-being coaching model/process [4]. As a case study the results are non-generalisable, but as an idiographic qualitative exploration of a real-life situation, the study illuminates how the practical application

of the resilience and well-being model [5] contributes to what we know about developing resilient leadership.

The research questions that guided the study were:

- Will the resilient and well-being model/process facilitate situational awareness of resilient leadership?
- Will the resilient and well-being model/process develop coachee resilience to the extent that it can be explicitly included within his leadership repertoire?

#### 2.1.3. Data collection

Data captured during coaching sessions was initially recorded on the resilience and well-being model. This was combined with field note observations and written in the form of reflective summaries sent to the coachee. The coachee was asked to reflect on the summaries, add comments and insights of his own, and confirm/disconfirm summaries for accuracy. The summaries formed reflective discussions undertaken at the beginning of each new coaching episode and between episodes via email, these facilitated sense making [26] of a maturing resilient leadership repertoire gained through a lived experience [29].

Data was collection over a 6-month period through multiple sources, these included:

- observational field notes
- coaching notes that required the recording of resilience and well-being statements
- a reflective coaching journal
- in-depth coaching summaries which the coachee scrutinised for accuracy and provided reflective feedback
- a coachee leadership narrative collated from the coachee's reflective responses (via email) to questions that required him to apply the resilience and well-being model/process in practice

#### 2.1.4. Ethical considerations

A full explanation of the study, and requirements for participation, was given at the beginning of the coaching relationship. Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis and could be withdrawn by the coachee at any time. The coachee was informed that participation in the study in no way affected his opportunity to access coaching. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured and opportunities to scrutinise, confirm and disconfirm data were offered throughout the study period. Permission was sought and given to disseminate findings.

#### 2.1.5. Data analysis

Data analysis became a dual hermeneutic iterative process, with both coach and coachee reflecting on and interpreting data throughout the study period [23]. The lens with which the data was viewed included, *organisational stressors, response to stressors, ability to gain/regain*

*resilience traction* and *perceived challenges/opportunity*. Data coding was conducted by the author (coach) using the resilience and well-being model as an analysis frame, and this required:

- scrutinising all field notes, coaching notes and coaching summaries for repetition in the data
- comparing coachee insights and interpretations of resilience from experience of organisational stressors, response to stressors and ability to gain/regain resilience traction
- scrutinising leadership (coachee) narrative regarding interpretation of challenge/opportunity available during organisational transition (garnered from the reflective coach and coachee email correspondence)
- recording codes in relation to their situational representativeness on the resilience and well-being pathway. This messy process is familiar to qualitative researchers, the tidying up of data was achieved in the next stage when codes were clustered into emergent themes, which in turn became descriptors, situationally located on the resilience and well-being pathway

The emergent themes underwent scrutiny to ascertain researcher bias, this is different from the experiential lens with which a researcher may come to understand and explain certain phenomena, and amounted to looking for evidence that viewed the resilience and well-being model/process as positively contributing to resilient leadership. The bias was bracketed [26], and dealt with by proactively looking for evidence where the model/process may not have contributed to resilient leadership; this activity was viewed positively in as much as ultimately it would enable innovation and improvement of the model/process. Identified themes and researcher bias were also the subject of peer review conversations with an academic coach colleague, and incorporated into reflective discussions with the coachee. Both practices contributed to validity, and the latter enabled the positing of theories regarding leadership resilience borne from direct personal (coachee) experience.

#### 2.1.6. *The coaching/research process*

Establishing the coaching relationship and building trust is paramount in coaching practice, not least because the coaching/research process requires the coachee (research participant) to share their experiences of leadership resilience and well-being. The process began with an explanation of what resilience and well-being coaching is, and how the visual model that is part of the process, is used. The resilience/well-being model was then utilised to capture coachee resilient leadership experiences on the resilient and well-being pathway [5], which over time is populated with the lived experience descriptions of the coachee and represents a situational knowing of resilience.

This part of resilience and well-being model/process was developed from the work of De la Vega [30], who realised that our primordial centre (best self) is something that we can drift away from, and as a result become isolated, less resilient and unwell. In order to return to who we really are as leaders, we need to take action to move back to our 'best self'.

Surfacing the 'leadership voice' was facilitated through a range of questions designed to elucidate situational awareness of resilience and well-being. The process began by ascertaining where the coachee was on the resilience and well-being pathway, and orientating the coachee



towards his 'best self' space. In order to do this, the coachee had to surface what the 'best self' space meant to him in terms of his eudaimonic and/or hedonistic leadership journey. Questions that enabled the coachee to surface these memories included:

#### 2.1.6.1. Questions for primordial centre (best self)

1. Can you tell me why you chose to do this work?
2. Can you tell me why you chose this leadership role?
3. Who do you work for? Who does your role serve?

Responses to these questions vary, as there are lots of reasons why people work, and why people step forward to lead. Reasons can get lost in the chaos of organisational change, and revisiting them establishes a motivational 'best self' leadership goal.

#### 2.1.6.2. Coachee responses

1. *Why? Why do I do I choose this? Sometimes I wonder whether it chose me. (laughs, looks down). Really? You really want to know?*

*Yes, I do.*

*OK. ....(pause) I feel a strong sense of belonging. I care about the environment, I care deeply. I feel that we learn from it, it should be part of our education and we should hold our classrooms here! We are custodians, and we are all connected in some way to planetary systems so we should protect it, we should ensure that our children are able to enjoy this and take their turn in looking after it. I am inspired by this place, and I want it to inspire others. This place is magnificent, I respect that and I want to find ways to communicate that and share that with others, to help them to see how important it is. I feel responsible for sharing this place in a way that is sustainable, so that harm isn't done and that people can benefit from being here. Too often the environment suffers, because we don't consider the impact we have on it. We drive our agendas and the world suffers. Somehow we can balance what we need with what the planet can give us. That is why I chose this work because it has purpose....a good purpose, perhaps I should talk more about the purpose of this more...use it to...communicate the vision.*

2. *Leadership....(laughs). Is that what I am a leader! I don't feel like one at times. ...I certainly don't mind taking risks, I will try new things and I try to get my staff to do the same. I know my job title infers leader, and the leadership programme gives us all the speak and theories but you know I just think that we end up leading because of the lives we choose. I chose this work, I also chose promotion because I knew I could do more and if I am honest I also wanted to have more money as I have a growing family and need to provide for them. I also see us as contributing to the economy at a local level, so I believe I can bring financial stability not only to the organisation as we go through these changes but also to the area. The experience is a mixed blessing. Sometimes I do have the answers, I do know how to implement changes, I can bring the staff with me and when that happens...well ....I feel as though I am inspiring others, and that feels good, like everything fits. At other times...I am not who I think I should be, my purpose gets swamped by the overwhelm of uncertainty. I know*

*I have determination, some people say that is a nice way to describe stubbornness but I know the difference, and I am determined to do the best I can.*

**3. What do you mean....serves?**

*Not your employer, I mean the broader aspect of who your work serves*

*Ah, well like we have just been discussing, my work serves to educate others about protecting our resources so our children and grandchildren can take up the role in the future. If you take it from a local perspective we work with communities to share what we know about where we live, sometimes that can be quite scientific, sometimes it is pure history. Moving outwards... what we do impacts on other areas, on other businesses so we work with them and again share our ethos of sustainability. Moving outwards again, every time someone comes to visit they take away knowledge about what we do, so we can have a global impact. That way we are connected.*

*You say 'we'*

*Yes, we are all connected, that is the bigger picture. That is I guess the vision. Humm. I had lost sight of it. But that is it isn't it? That is who I am when I am being this 'best self' person you explained.....that is me when I am a leader. Well. I feel as though I have woken up and smelt the coffee!*

**2.1.6.3. Questions to determine pathway position**

- 1.** If we know what defines your leading 'best self' do you think that you are near to being this person?
- 2.** Using the diagram how far away from being this person do you think you are, can you indicate where you are?
- 3.** How do you know you are away from being this person?

**2.1.6.4. Responses**

- 1.** *(sigh, pause). Again you really want to know don't you.....(pause). After talking about who I am when I am firing on all cylinders and thinking about where I am now....well....it's a bit of a shock really. I mean I know that I have been struggling but...I am not that 'best' person right now. That 'best' person feels somewhat elusive, like someone far away in another room.*
- 2.** *I think I am here, here veering close towards the periphery. Although I don't know what the periphery is, what is the periphery?*

*It is not what I call the periphery, it is what you call the periphery. Perhaps you can tell me how you know you are away from being the 'best self' person, describe how it feels, physically and emotionally, tell me what you are doing.....*

- 3.** *Right now I feel as though I have to fight for everything, fight for survival of the organisation, fight for jobs for the staff, fight for my own job. (gets up starts walking around the office)*



*I am fighting my corner. People say things to me and I know I am defensive but I feel under attack, and I don't feel as though I have the answers to the problems or at least it feels like the answers I have are not wanted. I am paranoid that I am not good enough. My vision doesn't fit with finance and I am fighting to sustain things in a way that is not harmful. Having said that my fighting is combined with retreat and I know I am hiding from some of my staff because I am afraid I can't deal with their fear.... it brings me further down. I ask them to do things, and some of them just don't get the precipice we are on so they don't do it, or do it half-hearted so I vent, I shout at work. I shout at them, then I go home and I shout at home. (sighs)*

*It takes hours for me to calm down at home..., I am so so tired but paradoxically I can't sleep. It's like I am on alert with my head trying to figure things out all the time, but I can't, and it is like having two hands around my throat and I am being strangled. I can feel pressure on my chest. I am a drowning man. I am afraid'.*

While the underpinning Salutogenic approach shapes the whole coaching relationship, once the resilience and well-being descriptions have been surfaced, the coachee is gaining an implicit SoC. This is because the process facilitates sense making of a situation that may have become obscured by symptoms of workplace stress. Antonovsky's [1] SoC model incorporates three key components, which are:

- Comprehension of the current situation—being able to understand the situation well enough to predict some future outcomes
- Manageability of the current situation—having a locus of control—being resourceful and becoming resilient—having self-determination
- Meaning— finding meaning in what is happening/happened—believing there is a good reason for what is happening and that there remains a good reason to care about what happens in the future

Over the study period the three components were utilised in an explicit SoC process whereby the coachee was supported to comprehend, manage and find meaning [1] from his current workplace experiences. This facilitated a learned resourcefulness that enabled the coachee to identify GRRs that increased his sense of well-being, and in turn contributed towards leadership resilience.

#### 2.1.7. Findings

The coaching episodes interspersed over a 6-month time frame, with dedicated actions and reflections on actions, brought the coachee to a leadership SoC. This extended to develop sufficient situational awareness of a resilient 'self', and the impact of 'self' on others.

*Being more focused on me and impacts others have on me.... Being more focused on others and the impacts I have on others has made a huge difference to my leadership. I now listen, listen, listen to people and watch them (kindly!) but intently.*

Coachee

Developing a SoC and locating GRRs that ameliorate the effects of workplace stress assist us with the return towards a 'best self' space. Over the study period the coachee was able to

identify GRRs that increased his sense of well-being. The GRRs he chose allowed him 'time out' or 'recovery', which is essential in fostering resilience.

*I always park in the far car park so I can walk in, it takes me about 10 minutes to do this. I like the walk in. The pace and being outside prepares me. So this is a GRR...right? I used to cycle a lot and I felt good, I was a lot lighter then too. I can see now that when I am stressed I stop doing this as I think I should spend even my own time working to sort out all that is happening. So I have got my bike out again, cycled 20 miles last night. After about 10 miles I had forgotten about work. My brain had a rest!*

Coachee

One GRR that many leaders find difficulty operationalising is connected to asking for help. This is because leaders often feel as though as 'Leader' they should be providing all the solutions, yet asking for help contributes to resilience as it is part of being resourceful. The coach was able to develop this skill with very positive effect on his growing leadership resilience.

*Over the past few weeks there has been the realisation that my voice was not being heard within the SMT. Some of this is politics, some of it also has been about influencing people old and new within SMT. I have asked for help, as I always did, but now it has become much more of a dialogue. I needed support, I asked for it and ultimately now we are nationally supported in this issue. I have built allies within the board and without (some of these I suspect are still frail alliances) but I feel that when the SMT meets every week that I am no longer at the mercy of one or two individuals.*

Coachee

Leaders need to find their own resilient style, and by reflecting on his own emerging leadership resilience the coachee was able to identify with something that was a positive addition to his leadership repertoire.

*Being an anchor – this is a question I ask in all my encounters – 'Am I being an anchor'? This has helped a lot and kept me focused on the important things instead of constantly being drawn back into 'white noise' with individuals. There is so much chaos that I feel as though if I can be this for myself and others then we will weather the storm. It means I can stop and see who I am, am I leading my team on to the rocks, or am I holding them or myself back? I can identify with being an anchor as it means I stop to make sense of what is going on...and I can see where I am in terms of what number I am....and then do something about it.*

Coachee

#### 2.1.8. Discussion of findings

The aim of this study was to explore situational spaces [31] on the resilience and well-being pathway, and by providing an opportunity for the leader's 'voice' to be heard [32, 33], develop our understanding of what it may be like for a leader to be in each space at a given time.

The research questions that guided the study were:

- Will the resilient and well-being model/process facilitate situational awareness of resilient leadership?
- Will the resilient and well-being model/process develop coachee resilience to the extent that it can be explicitly included within his leadership repertoire?

The resilient and well-being model/process did facilitate situational awareness regarding leadership resilience, and was successfully used to construct descriptors that populated all of the resilience and well-being spaces. The descriptors provided tangible positions that motivated the coachee to progress to an improved space and eventually towards becoming his 'best self'. The 'best self' was the ultimate goal, and movement towards this was facilitated through leadership goals embedded within each position. The effect of identifying the two polarised spaces was profound, the 'best self' space elicited a return to eudaimonic feelings of passion, belonging and purpose; the 'periphery' space descriptions surfaced emotions of fear, isolation and being out of control. In terms of leadership the periphery is likely to be a disruptive and distressing place to be, the impact on the leader and the organisation they were leading would be significant. It is in this space that the more severe psychobiological symptoms manifest [5, 34, 35], and where dysfunctional leadership contributes to chaos and disintegration.

The polarised spaces were the easiest to surface, the remaining pathway spaces are more nuanced and require discernment. Resilience and well-being are not fixed states, and resilience can be eroded over time or by significant impactful events [5]. For example, during the ensuing months it emerged that the coachee himself was being bullied by a senior manager, this caused a fluctuation in his resilience and affected his performance so that he moved from his best self back towards the periphery. The coachee's emerging SoC; however, assisted with ameliorating the impact of bullying, as he was able to recognise previous similar behaviours, and was able to consolidate how he had learned from prior experience. This enabled him to continue to care about himself, his work and his colleagues, and by having a SoC was able to re-activate GRRs (cycling) that supported his return to his leadership best self. In addition, the actions devised between coaching sessions, such as explicitly thanking staff, became part of the coachee's GRRs and brought the coachee into pro-social behaviours that are indicative of resilience.

*I am thanking a minimum of three people every day; something I realise I do anyway; however what I did not realise I do is simply say thanks and move on (sometimes a bit too quickly), so I am now saying thanks and discussing why the thanks and what we can do next. Using thanks as an opener to a deeper dialogue over what went well, not so well, what would they do different next time – how can I help etc.*

Coachee

By explicitly revisiting how he was understanding, managing and finding meaning (SoC) during this leadership episode [23], the coachee began to embed a SoC mindset that has the potential to positively impact on his health and well-being in the long term [2, 3]. The IPA methodology dovetailed with resilience and well-being coaching so well that the 'voice' of the leader (coachee) who was struggling, spoke,

*Transitional change is tough. My mistake has been not accepting, or giving myself the permission to accept how hard it has been. It got the team down and eventually got me down. Change affects everyone and everything and has unexpected side effects. Do not change things lightly. Far better to carry out paced evolutionary change than having to re-do an entire structure.*

Coachee

The resilient leadership goals, borne from his SoC, were aligned with the in-house organisational leadership programme, so that they contributed towards emotional leadership, communication and collaboration skills.

*Where am I now? Overall the outcomes to transitional change has been extremely positive – I have a great team who are keen and eager to perform, they want to actually be a team and importantly I had a say in their recruitment. It feels good.*

Coachee

The resilient and well-being model/process developed the coachee's appreciation of the inherent stress of his leadership role, one in which his self-perception shifted to one of resilience. The coachee remained employed in the same role, and still had to lead a difficult workplace transition, the crucial difference was the coachee possessed a more resilient mindset and had developed resilient leadership skills that would facilitate optimism, self-efficacy and potency.

*As the leader, being the captain, is often or can at least often seem a lonely place. It challenges us leaders to face our demons and importantly make others do more and be more accountable. Through this process my team is stronger and I am stronger because of this – it will remind us how we really are as leaders... how we are and also what we can be.*

Coachee

#### 2.1.8.1. Lessons learned from the study regarding resilience and well-being process

The request made to the coachee to keep a reflective journal was fulfilled at best piece-meal. Dedicating reflective time to write was not something that the coachee could commit to, ensuring that reflection remained part of the process was brought about through providing the coachee with detailed coaching summaries and asking him to feedback on their accuracy, and to add his thoughts post coaching session. In addition, reflection was prompted via specific questions sent by email between sessions, asking the coachee to respond thoughtfully to incidents in work and how he related these to the resilience and well-being model/process. Adapting the process in this way was less onerous and reduced chances of disengagement from the coachee.

### 3. Conclusion

The case study offered the opportunity to capture and share the lived experience of a leader as coachee, during a leadership episode in which he was experiencing workplace stress. The study demonstrates how resilient leadership is born of a dynamic experience. In this instance 'dynamic form' takes a very practical interpretation, and means to represent the fluid changes in resilience and well-being as experienced by leaders [4]. At an individual level, the resilience and well-being model/process assists leaders to become situationally aware of their leadership resilience and by doing so encourages them to become proactive about improving it.

Through the development of a SoC, the coachee was able to define descriptors of his own resilience/well-being, and in doing so re-engage with his leadership 'best self'. The resilience/well-being model/process provides the wherewithal for leaders to be active contributors to their own and their colleague's resilience and well-being. This may of itself go some way to prevent an organisational culture of learned helplessness [35] and move towards a focus of learned resilience and well-being [36].

The case study has contributed to what we know about resilient leadership [37] by demonstrating that the leadership repertoire can be formerly supported to achieve resilience through a process of learning to develop a SoC [2], which in turn brings the leader towards their leading 'best selves' [30]. The value of the study lies in the subjective self-expression of leadership salutogenesis [3], and may also illuminate the relationship between workplace stress and impact on psychobiological states [3, 38–41].

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