I believe that 80% of what it takes to change our behavior is a function of our ability to self-regulate. I say this after teaching coaching skills to thousands of people all over the world. I noticed that they often struggled most when they were trying too hard to 'coach' and were operating from a non-optimal state. When they allowed themselves to be more fully human and to connect with another human, most of them found they could coach quite naturally and effectively. This is why in narrative coaching we focus so much on situating the client in the moment, in themselves, in session and in their stories. The closer they get to the essence of their stories, the more they will have to work with in the session. Our role as coaches is in large part be more fully present as a witness to their journey and act as a witness and a guardian for the changes that are seeking to make.

What this means for us in narrative coaching is that we listen to clients' stories with highly trained ears and eyes. We do so because we believe that stories make visible the largely invisible narrative processes that drive their life. By bringing these internal narratives into the room, they are more able to work with them and reconfigure them so they can get the results they want.

However, they will often unconsciously avert their attention and ours from the parts of the stories where they feel vulnerable. This shows up in what is left out of their stories, what is
rushed by in their telling, how their body or face changes at certain points, and more. Our role as a coach is to help them trust us in themselves enough so they can be more fully present to their own narration.

This is why in narrative coaching, three of the most important skills we teach are how to notice these moments, call for a timeout to pause the conversation, and invite the client to return to the previous moment to pay closer to attention to what just happened. It is analogous to rewinding a movie and then playing it back at a much slower speed. We often slow it down to frame by frame so that we can help clients to become more fully aware of what the story is trying to say. There will come moments in the process of working this way when clients awaken to aspects of their stories that reveal the true purpose for coaching as well as the doorway to their resolution. These often relate to what psychologist Karen Horney called their “wholehearted wishes.” From here, you can work with them to determine how they would like to bring this new story to life.

Look for the signs and call a timeout.

What I look and listen for:

• Gaps in the story and things not said
• Changes in facial expression or body posture
• Deflections (away from content or experiences, past or present)
• Shifts in the energy in the conversation (+/-)
• Characters that seem out of place

Increase their presence and explore their experience.

The focus here is on helping them to become more aware of what's happening within them and around them, to connect themselves and their stories more intimately, and to recognize that their stories have a purpose that is most easily discovered when they can quiet themselves and be fully present. As we say a narrative coaching, it is about inviting them into new experiences not generating more explanations.
Make finer distinctions and unpack assumptions.

Questions I ask include:

• What is happening for you right now?
• Where do you notice it in your body?
• What words come up for you?
• What do you associate with that word or phrase?
• Does this remind you of anything?
• What if we just paused there for a moment?
• Tell me about X (what was skipped over)?

Get to the crux of the issue and meet them there.

In working this way, you will quickly discover that you ask far less questions and gathering far less information than in the past—enabling the client to achieve what they are seeking from coaching in far less time. Just as 80% of what it takes to change their behavior is a function of their ability to self-regulate and put themselves into a more optimal state, it is also true that 80% of the value of coaching is in identifying the true crux of the issue, the pivot in the story. So, go meet them there.