



Making the impossible possible

Life coach Kathryn White helped Michael McGrath, diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, to be the first disabled person to reach the south and north poles. She explains how

Coaching is a fascinating and rewarding experience. Every one I work with has their own unique story. Together we test their boundaries and explore the possibilities of re-scripting their lives, enabling self empowerment of the individual, to achieve quality, wholesome results for their Life Goals.

One person I coached, whose story is a little bit out of the ordinary was Michael McGrath.

'Michael is going on an expedition to the North Pole, he has Muscular Dystrophy.....and he is interested in having coaching.'

My first thought was: 'Going to the North Pole, that's amazing!Why is he doing it?'

On meeting Michael it was obvious that he was absolutely determined to achieve his goal of reaching the North Pole, promoting awareness for those with muscular dystrophy and helping to raise funds for the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign of Great Britain of which he was a Trustee. Michael told me 'I've been looking for a third event to complete a trilogy of events'.

Monies raised are today being used as part of the North Star project that provides improved computer equipment to more efficiently monitor disease progression and to measure the success of new treatments in trials across 13 major muscle centres in the United Kingdom, in order to help the work towards finding an eventual cure for this condition.

As Michael puts it, 'More people have climbed Everest and gone to the moon than have been to the North Pole.' What he's too modest to add is that he's the

first person with Muscular Dystrophy ever to do this. It was decided that Michael would join the expedition for the final 150 metre walk to the Pole with a personal backup team of two.

His words were, 'Self belief, an immense inner strength of mind and self motivation drive me daily. Although my condition has radically changed the way I live my life, I decided early on that I would do everything I could to have a positive impact on others with Muscular Dystrophy.'

Our first step was to find what would be the purpose of the coaching.

Michael knew that the expedition itself would be an immense challenge even without Muscular Dystrophy. This debilitating, cruel, unforgiving, muscle-wasting disease brings many difficulties, including the major challenge of remaining upright and maintaining balance and the loss of muscle bulk means that he feels the cold severely, due to his less efficient circulatory system. Michael was also experiencing a drain on his self belief and motivation due to the view by some people, that the project would be totally impossible, ridiculous and even absurd. These were the physical and psychological challenges that Michael had to prepare for. As Michael said, 'Mentally I had to replace the fear that I couldn't cope with the extreme cold with the belief that I could cope with it and that it would not be a block in stopping me achieve what it was that I had set out to do.'

Together we decided that the purpose of the coaching was to access Michael's inner resources, remove the blocks, and install positive 'states' that would help him to deal with not only the

extremes of the polar environment but also the enormous challenges he would encounter, over and above the everyday challenges of his condition.

We met for four three hour sessions. Using the proven methodologies of Neuro Linguistic Programming and Time Line Therapy™ we initially tested and assessed Michael's motivation and goals. Successful sustainable 'change work' is dependent on strong positive self motivation and clear specific goals. (Necessity is another strong driver for change – as Michael can attest, due to him having to deal with Muscular Dystrophy. Necessity is a negative driver and saps energy, positive self motivation, something that we passionately want to achieve – energises.) Michael already had a very clear goal but his motivation was being clouded by negativity. This led us to explore Michael's fears, emotions and negative beliefs which were the motivation- sapping blocks to him achieving his goal.

Having resolved these issues, I asked Michael which resource or state would be of the greatest benefit to him on his expedition. He decided that a 'warm glowing' state would be the one to help him through the psychological challenge of the severe cold; the image of the little boy in the Ready Brek advert, who walks down the road with a warm orange glow around him, sprang immediately to his mind. We installed this image with the associated warm feeling. Michael learned to trigger this warm glow at critically cold times, putting him in the position to control his physiological state.

Sounds simple doesn't it. Although Michael was pursuing something out of the ordinary way of life for most of us,

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I used the same coaching techniques as I use with my clients every day.

Michael had tested and pushed the boundaries on his thinking once again, this time, through the coaching – all that remained to be done, was for Michael to take action and by so doing, become a catalyst to motivate others to do the same.

‘Kathryn White was fantastic in helping me replace certain fears of failing and in doing so, enabling me to achieve what many people said would be totally impossible, ridiculous and even some saying absurd. She was instrumental in enabling me to have a number of key resources and beliefs in positively addressing both my physical and cerebral limitations’, says Michael.

‘One specific example of this is the extreme cold that I experienced; in dealing with sub-zero temperatures of between -25 to -45 degrees C, I had a number of resources that I triggered at an unconscious level in creating what I refer to as my all-embracing ready-brek glow! It worked... giving a massive burst of warmth around my whole body and particularly my legs, when I needed it! Once triggered, it was like a red surge of incredible energy and warmth, zillions of red blood cells pounding their way through my veins, my heart furiously beating... it was awesome and incredibly

powerful. It was these powerful and very real resources that enabled me to achieve my goal, to make the impossible possible’, said Michael.

His ‘training’ involved a carefully monitored three month period of intensive stretching and soft tissue remedial massage and extensive mobilisation together with regular daily aerobic exercise to aid stamina building and walking capability. Even mild cold has effects on the body – it impairs nerve function, it decreases sensation and manual dexterity. Cold muscles mean decreased function, so for example, fingers become very stiff, clumsy and unable to grasp or grip.

In April 2002 Michael and his team left Heathrow for a small island east of the ice cap called Spitzbergen. It’s minus 10 degrees on Spitzbergen and Michael knows this because they had to wait on board a Russian freight plane for over six hours until it was decided that the weather was indeed too bad to fly. When eventually they did take off it was in the company of 27 drums of high grade kerosene – that in combination with chain-smoking Russian pilots added a new dimension of danger!

At the other end was Barneo, an ice camp which is seasonally erected for explorers and adventurers, from where helicopters ferry passengers closer to

the Pole. Here they waited an hour in tents while the weather worsened. The helicopter pilots refused to fly.

As for the Russian freight plane pilots – they were keen to leave because of fears about the weight of their aircraft on the three metre thick ice. Michael wanted to stick it out and wait for a break in the weather. In the end, Major Craig Kerry-Williams [a member of Michael’s team] made a decision and he and Michael flew back to Spitzbergen. In Michael’s words: ‘Was that it? Was this the closest I was going to get in achieving what we had set out to do?’

‘I was so disappointed. I had been just an hour away from the Pole. I thought that was that because we’d contracted for only one flight out and one helicopter rotation,’ says Michael. Luckily, they did manage it back to Barneo and were flown by helicopter to within 150 metres of their goal. ‘I wanted to walk unaided but because of the weight of the arctic boots, I had to ask for assistance in walking the distance.’ The terrain he encountered was variable, sometimes flat and slippery, at other times broken and sharp. Michael wasn’t able to wear skis which distribute one’s weight over the ice. Every step elicited an ominous cracking sound.

Was he frightened? ‘No, but I was seriously aware of the potential dangers, having carried out an extensive risk assessment. In fact, I was very much at peace with what I was doing and why I was doing it. I was in control.

‘The North Pole is an extraordinarily silent place, if there is no wind. It is one of the most hostile and raw environments on our planet. All you see is ice and blue sky [if the weather permits]. The sun is very bright because of the glare.’

So, does Michael feel he has achieved what he set out to do? ‘I want to inspire others to dig deep and unlock their own potential. It’s about self- belief, self-motivation and resilience in believing that whatever you want to do you can.’

Michael reminds us that in the compelling words of Nelson Mandela, quoting Marianne Williamson: ‘Our deepest fear is not that we’re inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we’re powerful beyond measure’.

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