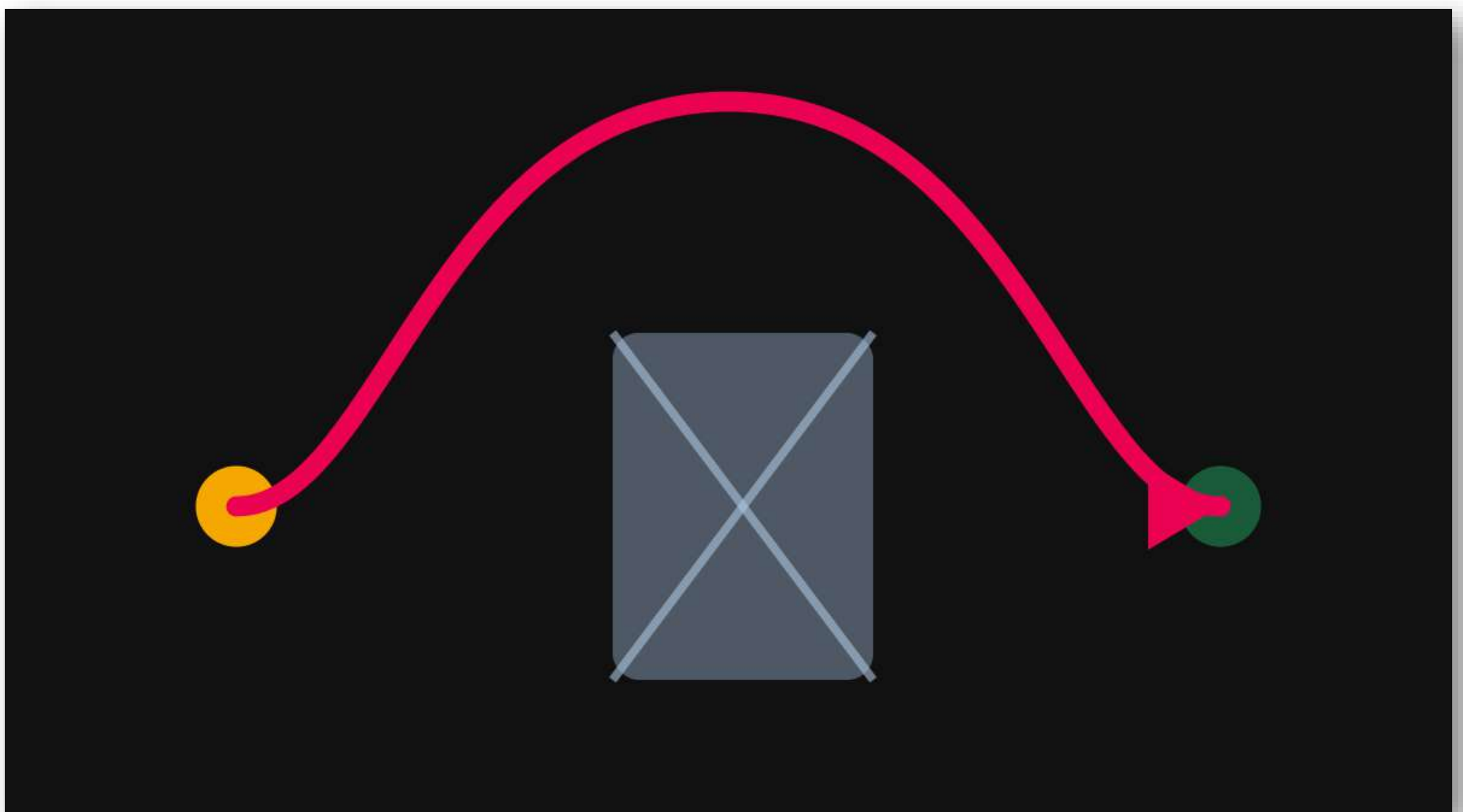


HOLD STORIES LIGHTLY

a cognitive defusion practice
for coaches, mentors,
facilitators and leaders



It is natural to get caught in the traps of listening to narrative, because we are drawn to a good story - one that fits our existing view of the world, or that lets us push discomfort away (Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson, 2012). In a coaching, mentoring or leadership context, this often shows up when we review someone else's work: a mentee's coaching session, a team member's presentation, a client's situation. We may find ourselves building a long history around them, or quietly judging their attitude, readiness, or capacity to change.

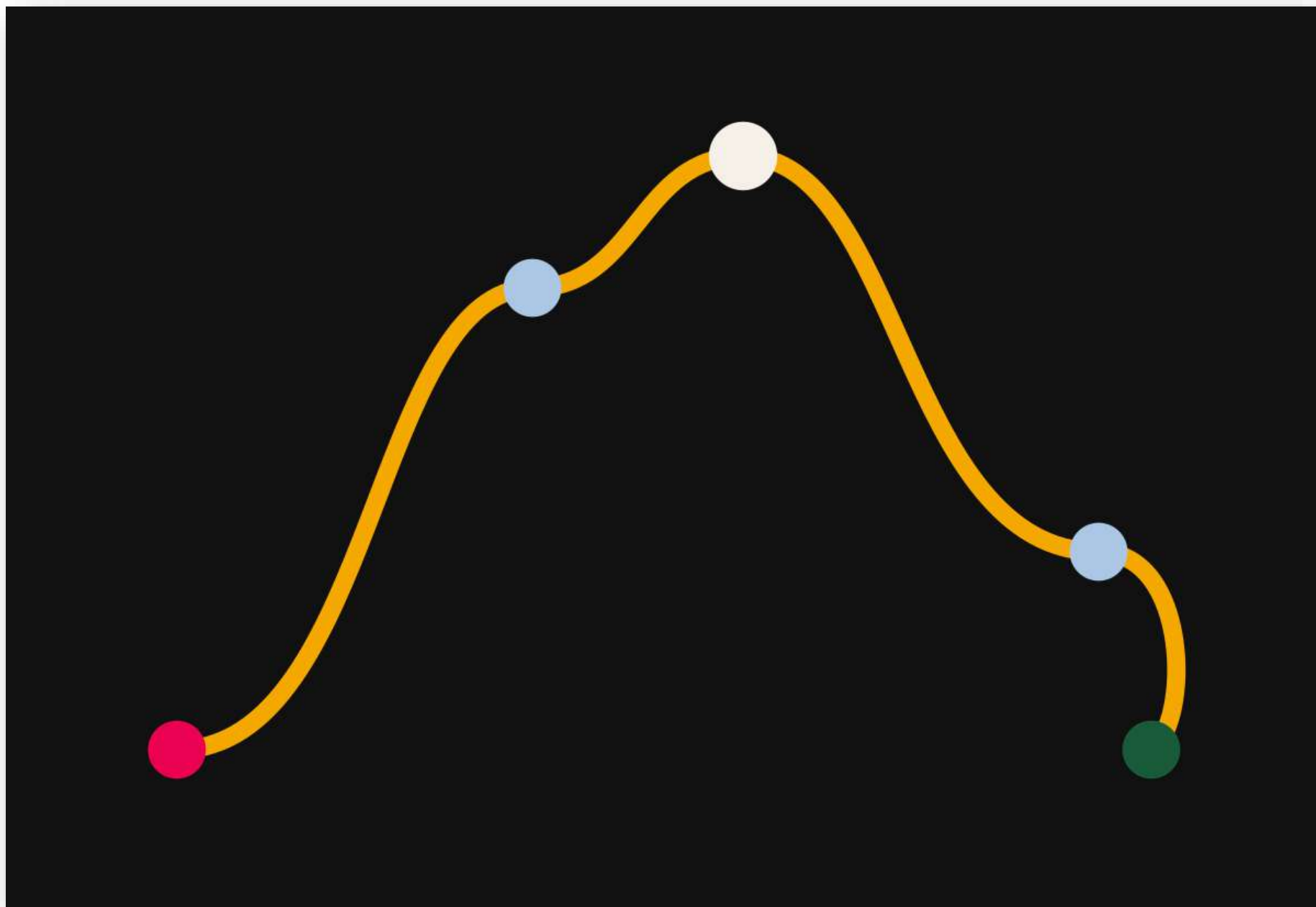
As a mentor, supervisor or senior leader, you can invite the person you're developing to notice their own narrative, and to consider how it might be narrowing their options - the range of things they feel able to think, say or try next. This comes from theory and research on cognitive distance from thoughts within Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT): creating enough separation from a thought that it is experienced as a passing mental event, rather than a literal truth to be obeyed (Hayes et al., 2006; Blackledge, 2007). Opening that distance is what allows someone to hold their own story more lightly, rather than being run by it.

Your own mind will do the same thing. It will offer you a story about the person you're developing, a rule about what a “good” coach, leader or facilitator should do, or a category to file a whole situation under. This same principle - noticing these mental events with a light touch, rather than treating the mind as an oracle - shows up, in different language, across several other established modalities, each pointing past the surface content of the story toward something else.

Why This Holds Across Modalities

Psychodynamic approaches work by attending to what sits beneath the story rather than the story itself - the unconscious patterns, defences and relational dynamics that shape why a particular account gets told in a particular way. Jonathan Shedler's landmark review of outcome evidence found effect sizes for psychodynamic therapy that matched or exceeded other well-established approaches, with gains continuing to grow after treatment ended (Shedler, 2010). In coaching and organisational contexts specifically, a substantial literature points to unconscious processes and patterns as pervasive and clinically relevant to the work, not a therapy-only concern (Levinson, 1982; Zaleznik, 2009; cited in psychodynamic coaching literature review, n.d.).

Somatic work has impact because it bypasses narrative altogether and works with information the story often cannot capture, or actively distorts: bodily sensation. Emotions are, by nature, embodied - both an implicit bodily process and an explicit narrative one - and distress increases when the bodily signal is never attended to, only the story about it (Price and Weng, 2021). Sustained, mindful attention to interoceptive sensation, rather than to the content of what is being said, has been shown to generate more granular, integrated insight than talking alone (Price and Weng, 2021; van der Kolk, 2014).



Existential inquiry creates deeper awareness of self and the topic by treating the presenting story as a doorway into larger, universal concerns - freedom, choice, meaning, mortality - rather than staying with its surface detail. Qualitative studies of practising existential coaches found this reframing of freedom and responsibility to be central to how the approach actually functions, not simply its theoretical framing (Existential coaching study, 2024; Van Deurzen and Hanaway, 2012). The detail of the story matters less here than what the story reveals about how someone is meeting their own existence.

Gestalt approaches redirect attention away from the reported content of a story and toward what is alive in the room right now - the present-moment field between the two people. Perls described the point where old patterns stop working and new awareness has not yet arrived as an impasse, at the centre of which sits what he called a fertile void: not empty, but generative (Perls, in Gestalt Therapy Verbatim). Working with what is happening now, rather than the account of what happened then, is itself the intervention.

Systemic approaches look past the individual's account entirely, toward the relational patterns the story sits inside. Murray Bowen's original family systems work showed that an individual's presenting narrative could shift substantially once the wider pattern of relationships around them was made visible, without ever directly challenging the story itself (Bowen, 1978; Bowen family systems theory and practice, 2024). The same logic transfers to coaching and mentoring: a coachee's account of a difficult client is rarely only about that client.

What unites all of these approaches is the same underlying move: attending to what is beneath, alongside, or beyond the details of the story, rather than becoming absorbed in the story as literal fact.



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