

GO HUG YOURSELF

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***Rachel Ellison* reports on how the Danish concept of hygge – living with ease – is going global and what working with it might look like in a coaching context**

Scented candles, logs on the fire, fluffy hot water bottle covers and cashmere socks. Think autumn colours: orange, gold, burnt ochre, deep cocoa. You may be experiencing hygge.

Pronounced '*hue-guh*', hygge is a Danish tradition meaning 'cosiness' or 'hug yourself'. It's both individual and communal.

Hygge is about living with ease. It's about mindful living and the conscious creation of a happy, self-nurturing atmosphere in the home or office. Politicians or business leaders might declare a meeting a hygge gathering.

According to the writer Soren Kierkegaard (*The Guardian*, 04/09/16), hygge is "a presence in the moment, an enclosing embrace or a cluster of warmth".

A businesswoman goes to a high-level meeting and rather than ask the PA to bring in the coffee, her Danish interlocutor says: "Let's light a candle." It's enticing, appealing and original for the international outsider. Hygge is consciously invoked to influence for success in business. It's a signal for warmth. Warmth of rapport. A signal for "let's do a deal together".

Representations of hygge seem to be emerging on multiple levels, from the fashionable practice of mindfulness by business leaders, to the preference for comfortable loungewear at home. From knitting circles and patchwork groups, to the slow cooking movement and meditation, hygge appears to offer old-fashioned comfort, for a compulsively connected digital age.

You can't buy hygge, you have to create it or co-create it with others.

The sudden arrival of hygge outside Denmark – in the form of coffee table books, hygge

recipe collections and philosophical, self-nurture tomes – coincides with a surge of interest in staying in to watch people bake*, dance** or sing collectively***.

Traditional village life of old now finds itself translated into multilingual, multimillion pound media formats and sold to television audiences around the world.

I think the notion of hygge – living at ease, with cosiness – reflects a primal need for comfort and containment. A need for protection, as when in utero.

Renew and reset

Hygge suggests both a physical space – a candlelit sitting room, bistro or office – and a mental place of refuge. In a world of ISIS, terror attacks, drowning refugees and geopolitical threat, hygge might offer respite. It's gentle. It's about resourcefulness. Its deliberately inexpensive physical representation may be the vehicle for achieving a sense of softness towards self and others.

I think hygge may answer a call for temporary insulation – from the outside world, from one's own suffering or that of others. A space to renew and reset. A place of safety. Some shelter from the brutality experienced first-hand, or witnessed vicariously on the news.

On a practical, seasonal note, hygge could be an emotional and physical strategy – it fills a void or darkness; a therapeutic intervention, for those living in northern latitudes to help cope when it feels like midnight by mid-afternoon.

Hygge may offer a defence against depression. A place or a space where you can risk being undefended. And just be.

Uniquely Danish

All very comforting and inclusive, it would seem. But what's the opposite of hygge? It's: uhyggelig or 'scary'.

The shadow side of this 'uniquely Danish' concept suggests hygge is less harmonious and inclusive than one might assume. Even the use by Danes of the phrase 'uniquely Danish' leaks a clue to prejudice and exclusion. A sense of in-group/out-group, as perceived by some non-Danes, implies that not everyone is welcomed in for a hug.

Hygge may have a dark side that's not uniquely Danish, but reveals "totally accepted casual racism – even from upstanding middle class professionals", claims one ex-pat I

spoke to.

So hygge can also signal 'apartness' rather than cosy mutual support.

Traditional appeal

I think hygge is a fascinating cultural tradition. Its appeal is broadening internationally, perhaps because of a need for comfort, connection and containment from existential distress.

In an era when so much can be bought, hygge offers an antidote to material grasping and frayed nerves. Temporary relief to allow us to breathe and calm down. Respite and repair. Likewise, for the high-level corporate decision-maker, by inserting some hygge at the beginning of a meeting, as an alternative to beer and football, for relationship building. If hygge is a co-creation, then signalling and responding to that signal could prove a shortcut to enjoying an atmosphere of trust and productiveness.

I wonder how leaders outside Denmark, might make hygge 'their own' and find a metaphorical representation of it, such that more meetings might begin with the equivalent of: "Let's have a candle...".

* *Great British Bake Off*: 14 million viewers in the UK; airs in 20 countries

** *Strictly Come Dancing*: 10 million viewers; airs in 50 countries. Estimated worth £500 million

*** *The Choir*

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What is hygge?

- A physical need – shelter from cold/snow/ice/darkness
- An emotional need
- Psychological safety or for the promotion of psychological health, eg, a defence against depression

- An external environment and/or an internal 'space'
- A political need
- A lubricant for success in business

Hygge and coaching

How might coaches use the concept of hygge in their work?

While a therapist might be able to create a place of warmth, comfort, containment, intimacy and safety in their consulting room, the nomadic coach might find a physically hygge environment harder to create. Roving from one office to another, even coaching in public spaces, how might hygge be a consciously applied resource?

Well, here are a few ideas:

- *Explore hygge as metaphor, eg, what hygge is there in the client's team/organisation/approach to work challenge?*
- *Ask about self-nurturing*
- *Ask when has/does this leader hug him/herself?*
- *Work with the metaphor of cosy, as easy, happy living*
- *Search for the dark side of harmony*
- *If it's all sounding too cosy, ask what's discordant*
- *If the client's narrative is punishing, self-punishing or harsh, ask how they could create more of a hygge environment*
- *As coach, where's your hygge – external environment?*
- *And where's your hygge – internally?*
- *Explore hygge as pretence, eg, as a cover for relationships that are far from cosy*
- *Be curious about inclusiveness and apartness*
- *Explore hygge as a concept for healing – a lot of clients (and coaches) may be feeling insecure and traumatised existentially by the consequences of Brexit, Trump's victory in the US elections and Putin's military and political manoeuvres*
- *Ask about what the opposite of hygge – uhyggelig – means for the client*
- *Anti-hygge: What's your inner Trump? Coaches think of themselves as compassionate, kind and there to help...but which bits of us are attacking and biased? Remember, one person's rage and failure may represent recognition and hope for another*

- *Feeling without hygge: For both coach and client, ask what you may be projecting because of how you're feeling, versus what you'd like to project*

Hygge: Psychoanalytic themes

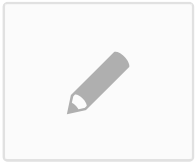
- Comfort
- Containment
- Insulation
- Hibernation
- In utero
- Safety
- Self-protection
- Defence against the cold
- Defence against short days and long nights
- Defence against depression
- Defence against the outside world
- A coping strategy for incoming threat or perceived threat
- Nostalgia for safer times, eg, baking scones versus ISIS and terrorism attacks
- Gathering together
- Co-creation
- Closeness and inclusion – or it is exclusion?
- Personal level – national level – now international spreading of the concept of hygge
- Being/living at ease
- Consciously creating the environment
- A mental space, a physical space – an internal versus external spatial concept?

Tags: [Coaching at Work Volume 12 Issue 1](#), [culture](#), [Feature](#), [hygge](#)

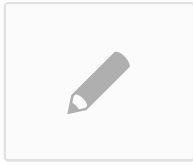
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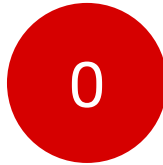
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