

A Coach for 'Team You'

Many Who Want a Winning Record in the Game of Life Are Skipping the Shrink and Hiring a Life Coach Instead

By Cecilia Capuzzi Simon

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When Mary Elizabeth Becker was diagnosed with an arterial malformation in her brain, she faced life-threatening surgery and the realization that, at age 31, her life was not what she wanted it to be. She was unhappy in her job and struggling with a weight problem. If she survived, she promised herself, she would change her life.

Becker did survive, and tried to change. But seven years of psychotherapy did not help her switch careers or shed pounds, she says. It uncovered deep-seated reasons for her life choices, but when it came to living a happier, balanced existence, she says, "psychotherapy failed me."

So last year, Becker abandoned psychotherapy and hired a life coach.

Once reserved for executives facing tough decisions in elite corners of corporate America, coaching is trickling down to the masses. Think of coaching as having your own Dr. Phil on call -- someone there not to diagnose emotional problems or feel your pain, but to tell you to buck up and help you make a plan. Becker, who has founded a small arts business and lost weight in the year since she started being coached, credits the coaching with helping her identify big-picture goals, set strategy and stay focused.

"When I tell people I'm using a life coach, they roll their eyes and pass it off as New Age baloney," she says. "But coaching is filling a need for people like myself who are really ready to transform their lives."

With its focus on self-help and maximizing potential, coaching does have a New Age aroma. Terrie Lupberger, CEO of Newfield Network, an Olney-based program that trains coaches, says coaching's rise is due in part to a "crisis of meaning" in American society. "We have more information in our culture today than we can fathom," she says. "Yet people are not happier than they were 10 or 15 years ago."

Coaching, says Patrick Williams, who once practiced as a clinical psychologist and later founded the Institute for Life Coach Training, a coach training program for therapists, is about "futuring" people.

This sort of talk makes many in the mental health field think of coaching as a "sell job," as New York psychoanalyst and Hunter College professor Joyce Slochower says. Psychologists who abandon their traditional role and declare themselves coaches are often scorned by colleagues: Are they leaving unprofitable practices and looking for easy riches? Are they refusing to put up any longer with the annoyances of managed care? Are they bad therapists? David Fresco, assistant professor of psychology at Kent State University, warns that the field remains unregulated and lacking in standards, meaning coaches "have the capacity to make hoards of money without professional oversight." Many coaches have no formal training, either in coaching or psychology.

Nevertheless, the coaching profession is exploding, and psychologists -- if at first reluctantly -- are coming on board. Psychotherapy Networker magazine says it could be the "wave of the future."



Many who want a winning record in the game of life are skipping the shrink and hiring a life coach instead. (Illustration by Melinda Beck)

Some 20,000 full-time coaches practice worldwide, about three-quarters of them in the United States, according to the International Coach Federation (ICF), coaching's credentialing organization. More than 6,000 are members of ICF, up from 1,500 three years ago. Forty percent of ICF members are psychotherapists who have become full-time coaches or added coaching to their practices. Several training programs are designed to help therapists make the transition. (There are even coaches for therapists who want to become coaches.) Universities, including Georgetown and George Mason, offer coaching courses. And the American Psychological Association (APA) sponsors coaching workshops for continuing education credit.

Perhaps most telling of coaching's move into the mainstream is this: In April, Martin Seligman, the former APA president whose popular book "Authentic Happiness" promotes positive psychology, teamed up with one of the top therapist coaching schools. He and instructors at Bethesda-based MentorCoach will teach a "vanguard of trainers" to spread coaching and positive psychology to other psychologists. Their goal: Train 10,000 coaches in 10 years so that coaching and positive psychology will "penetrate the culture," as MentorCoach founder and CEO Ben Dean says.

"Coaching seems like a fad now," says Dean, who was trained as a clinical psychologist but now works full time as a coach and trainer of coaches. "But there is a real hunger among people for this. This is something that has legs. Coaching is where psychotherapy was in the 1910s. We are right at the beginning."

In truth, life coaching has been around since the mid-'80s, with Thomas Leonard largely credited with its founding as a profession. Leonard, who died in February of a heart attack at age 47 shortly after being interviewed for this article, had left his financial planning practice to counsel his prosperous yuppie clients on how to spend their money and live their newly affluent lifestyles. They had problems related to their wealth that they couldn't discuss with friends or family, he said, and such questions as "What color should my BMW be?" and "Where should I buy my vacation home?" It may sound vacuous and flip now, but Leonard saw himself as helping them "create a life" instead of "fixing problems." He was, he said, "working with people's problems in a positive way."

He was also enough of an entrepreneur to see that such a service was useful not only to the very rich. In 1989 he began training coaches. In the early '90s he started Coach U, which has graduated some 8,000 coaches. (Leonard sold Coach U in 2000, but it remains one of the most successful programs.) In 1994 he established what would become the ICF. In the process, he set the standards for a largely virtual industry - - 90 percent of coaching is done via phone or e-mail -- that has allowed its practitioners the potential for unusual wealth and freedom of lifestyle. Some highly successful life coaches earn six-figure incomes, boast four-day workweeks and coach from second homes in resort areas. Leonard, for example, spent five years on the road in an RV, coaching clients by cell phone from the tops of mountains in Yosemite to the tops of tables at Wendy's outlets.

So why can't a person in psychotherapy achieve the same positive life goals -- weight loss, career change or simply learning how to be happier -- that coaching claims to provide its clients? The notion that psychotherapy is somehow different from coaching in its impact or intent outrages psychotherapy purists.

"It is already an intrinsic part of what we do," says Slochower. "I object to this black-and-white split. Any therapist who works with someone in a way that only focuses on what is wrong is doing bad therapy. There is no one on earth -- even a chronic schizophrenic -- who doesn't have the capacity to feel good about themselves. Otherwise, what the hell are we doing?"

But when Slochower describes the psychotherapeutic process, she characterizes it as working "from the inside out. . . . It's talking about old pieces, and how they get re-created in the present, and how they can change." And for coaches – and their clients -- that's the rub.

Coaching doesn't look back. It's not a replacement for psychotherapy, and it doesn't attempt to diagnose mental disorders. It's for "high-functioning" individuals, as coaches call them, who want their lives to be better in some way. Coaches who have been through a reputable training program are taught to spot signs of emotional illness. If a coach suspects such trouble, he or she is supposed to refer the client to a mental health professional. In fact, says Marti Campbell, a coach in Chevy Chase, depressed people probably can't be coached because they are unable to take action.

"The bottom line," says Linda Finkle, a coach and president of the D.C. chapter of ICF, "is that coaching is forward-moving and action-oriented. We don't care how you got to where you are. We're not here to get you over it or deal with it better. We ask, 'What do you want to do with your life?' We help you to recognize what's holding you back, and then move you forward."

Williams, whose Institute for Life Coach Training is based in Fort Collins, Colo., says most people would benefit from such intervention. He estimates that 80 percent of those seeing a therapist have no mental disorder, but because therapists lack the skills or knowledge to help high-functioning people, they slap a label on anyway to satisfy managed care and fit the patient into a treatment that focuses on pathology.

What many therapists are beginning to realize is that they are failing to reach a big slice of the population -- or failing to cash in on a huge market, depending on one's viewpoint. There are those like Mary Elizabeth Becker -- in therapy but getting nowhere and likely to leave eventually, feeling frustrated and dissatisfied. And there are others, especially men, who would never consider psychotherapy but who would talk through problems with a seemingly less threatening, more positive coach. (Williams estimates that 60 percent of coaching clients are men, while only 30 percent of those in psychotherapy are.) For people who are "terrified of treatment," says Washington clinical psychologist and coach Lynn Friedman, "coaching is a good thing. It allows them to get help in a way that doesn't make them feel bad."

The distinction between therapy and coaching became apparent five years ago to Ellen Ostrow, a clinical psychologist in the District and Silver Spring. After 17 years of practice, she began to notice that many of her patients, primarily lawyers, had no diagnosable mental disorder. Instead, they were under stress because of workplace and lifestyle issues. What they wanted -- and needed -- was a safe place and an expert ear to help work them out, she says. Ostrow found herself acting more like a coach and less like a psychotherapist with those patients. After training with MentorCoach, she now divides her practice 50-50 between coaching clients and psychotherapy patients.

"After years of empathizing with my patients' pain and anguish, coaching lets me empathize with their excitement and exuberance," she says. "It's selfish, but it brings excitement into my own life."

Lynne Hornyak, who practiced psychotherapy in the District for 20 years but now coaches full time, is also pleased with her new field: "I entered psychology as a naïve 21-year-old to work in wellness. That was my dream. And now," after taking up coaching, she says, "I'm back," finally working on wellness.

Increasingly, the public is getting the distinction, too. Ann Cochran hired a coach when she wanted to make a transition from her corporate communications work into feature writing. Another psychotherapy veteran (she had been successfully treated for depression), Cochran sought out a coach for her career issues. "A psychologist would probably be better equipped to help you sort out whether a problem is just

job-related or a bigger life issue," she says. "But I was clear. I just wouldn't dream of going to a psychologist to be a travel writer."

Though many coaches are starting to specialize -- there are those who bill themselves as experts in relationships, health, family, ADHD, even parents of anorexics -- most are generalists whose clients work with them because they click together. The coach Cochran selected, for example, had no expertise in writing or journalism. What she did have was an instinctive understanding of human motivation and -- perhaps most distinctively -- a plan of action to which Cochran felt personally and financially accountable. Not only was Cochran primed and motivated to make change, she was also paying for it. Coaching is not covered by health insurance.

At a typical \$250 to \$400 per month (executive coaches can command \$1,500) and a three-month commitment, the coachee buys three to four half-hour or 45-minute sessions a month (usually done over the phone) and usually a number of unscheduled phone calls -- often prompted by the desire for immediate advice -- to the coach. The consultations are confidential. In most cases, coach and coachee never meet in person.

Becker, one of Finkle's clients, has seen her coach's picture but has never met her in person. The phone, say most coaches and their clients, is an effective, efficient instrument, requiring that they get to the business of coaching with no distractions. There are some, however, who prefer human contact. Terrie Lupberger, for example, likes to meet clients in person because she learns much about them from their body language.

Once a client connects with a coach, the process is similar to that of cognitive behavioral therapy. In both techniques, clients are asked to set goals and then are prompted by questions meant to cut to the heart of ideas that get in the way of success. Homework is designed to test skills and move toward goals. (See "How to Get Coached" on this page.)

Years of training can separate therapists and coaches. Therapists with PhDs may train for more than six years. Coaches need a minimum of 60 hours of training and 250 hours of coaching client experience for "associate" certification; "master" certification requires 200 hours of education and 2,500 hours of coaching experience. ICF, which is based in the District, has credentialed just 1,000 coaches, though the organization has 6,000 members worldwide.

But the major difference between coach and therapist is in the degree of active intervention.

Linda Finkle, for example, says she has a client who likes to whine. At the beginning of each session, she gives him exactly seven minutes to get it out of his system, and then cuts him off. "I could let him go on, but it doesn't help him. Few can be brutally honest. I don't want to hurt anybody, but if I see clients doing something that gets in their way, I've got to tell them or I've shirked my responsibility as a coach."

Finkle's approach would appall most therapists, but then she's not working with people looking to be healed. And that highlights the most important distinction between coaching and therapy: The doctor-patient relationship is different from that of coach and coachee. There is an "implied dependency" between doctor and patient, explains Ellen Ostrow. A therapist agrees to take on a patient's well-being, and the patient's internalized view of the therapist is an essential part of the healing process. Also, the relationship is protected by an ethical and legal framework. Psychologists who coach and do therapy keep their client lists very separate, or they should. As Dean and other therapists-turned-coaches point out, coaching a person who is also patient could interfere with treatment and leave the therapist open to ethical questions and charges of malpractice.

The coaching relationship, on the other hand, functions as a collaborative business arrangement. "Coaching is two persons coming together to co-create," says Hornyak. "One has expertise in change; the other has expertise in their life."

Who could argue with such an attractive proposition? But even some coaches urge caution.

"It's really a buyer-beware marketplace," says Silver Spring psychotherapist and coach Lynn Grodzki, who specializes in training therapists who want to become coaches. "There are so many people with vast differences in training. Some are very good. Some are not."

But that hasn't deterred results-driven clients. One coachee, who believes that using a coach gave her a competitive edge at work, declined to have her name used in this article because she didn't want colleagues to know about -- or replicate -- her advantage. •

Cecilia Capuzzi Simon regularly writes about psychology for Health.

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