

## Good-bye, couch.

## Hello, coach.

### Therapy is so old-fashioned. Remedy your social or work problems with the latest fix: a personal coach.

by Mary Ellin Lerner

Jeff Johnston, a 38-year-old dot-com executive from Dallas, felt unfulfilled at work. His confidence was low, his frustration was high, and it was spilling over into his family life. He wanted to talk to someone who could help him get on the right track, but he didn't want to delve into his past with a therapist. Surfing the Internet, he learned about a new type of helping professional known as a personal coach and took his troubles to coach Roz Van Meter.



Working with personal coach Jaye Myrick, right, Emily Harris of Orlando, Fla., focused on her love of costumes and began to work in puppetry and theater.

Working together via phone, e-mail and informal lunches, they listed his passions and priorities, and mapped out a plan for him to find a new job where he could use his legal expertise and financial savvy to tackle more challenging projects. "She's like a mentor," says Johnston, now happily ensconced in a new position. "She always says: 'Keep going. You're on the right path. Don't worry. You have the talent.' A personal coach helps you help yourself make your life better."

Good-bye, couch; hello, coach. The latest wrinkle in shrinking is not the probing analyst of Woody Allen movies but a chipper cheerleader who helps clients set priorities and goals, take action, make changes and reshape their lives.

Personal coaches are proliferating these days, with more than 10,000 coaches serving an average of 15 clients each, up from only 2,000 in 1996 and estimated to grow to 50,000 in the next five years. There are more than 3,000 personal coach Web sites on the Net. Corporations such as IBM, Marriott and GTE have hired coaches to increase worker productivity.

Personal coaching differs from traditional therapy, which helps heal wounds by digging up emotional conflicts and childhood traumas. Most personal coaches are not psychotherapists, although some, like Van Meter, have a background in therapy; many migrate from professions such as business consulting or financial planning. Instead, a personal coach helps a client out of a crisis by encouraging him or her to set new goals and carry them out.

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**The personal coach is a cheerleader who helps you set priorities and goals, take action and reshape your life.**

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Coaches help clients navigate their warp-speed lives and sort through the mental clutter of the Information Age. "The world we live in is getting faster," says coach Karen Kimsey-House, co-founder of the San Rafael, Calif.-based Coaches Training Institute, which boasts more than 5,000 graduates since 1992. "And because there is so much going on, so many different options available, they need someone to help them make quality decisions so they can live the life they want rather than the life

that is coming at them 90 miles an hour."

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Emily Harris, a 50-year-old costume designer from Orlando, Fla., who had worked in television and films, wanted a new career direction when she hired Orlando-based coach Jaye Myrick. "I was looking for different applications for my talents. I love costumes and fabrics but also writing, performing, poetry and dance." Through weekly conversations and specific assignments they analyzed Harris' strengths and weaknesses and formulated a plan. Now she's embarking on ventures in puppetry and children's theater.

And forget the comfy armchairs and tissues of the traditional shrink's office. Personal coaches, who charge an average of \$400 a month, work almost entirely by phone, fax and e-mail, and their props are checklists of obstacles, talents, dreams, accomplishments and goals.

Coaches offer strategies and plenty of aphorisms. Sandy Vilas, a personal coach who is CEO of Coaching Companies, a telephone and online training program for coaches, teaches his clients to be "toleration-free." That means getting rid of all the things they put up with, settle for, in their lives.

"I tell my clients to listen to [their] own inner voice," says the Dallas-based Van Meter, whose clients include entrepreneurs, lawyers, artists, accountants, writers and dentists. "And I tell them to install a pause button in the palm of their hand, which means to give yourself a chance to respond to situations instead of acting impulsively. There's no rewind button for life, so don't wring your hands about yesterday, because we are starting from today." With inspirational words and specific assignments, she has helped clients unclutter their kitchens and offices, brush up on their dating skills and find jobs to suit their souls.

Coaching is not appropriate for everyone. Experts caution that most coaches are not trained to deal with severe emotional problems and that clients with addiction or other serious mental disorders should seek help from psychology professionals. There is also a concern that with so many people hanging up shingles it's hard to know how to choose a coach, although those in the profession are striving to offer education and credentials through a growing number of training programs.

The best way to get a good coach, says Coachville.com CEO Thomas Leonard, is to find a friend or colleague who has worked with one. Interview four or five coaches. "Share with him or her your biggest problem and your biggest opportunity, and ask him or her what approach he or she would take. Then you'll get a sense of whether the coach can help you."

*Freelance writer Mary Ellin Lerner last wrote for USA WEEKEND Magazine about the latest in Halloween costumes.*

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## **More personal coach success stories**

John Hickok, a 43-year-old New York actor and director, was facing some career

roadblocks when he hired personal coach Jaye Myrick. He'd directed a hit play in London but wasn't sure how to build on that success back in the States. He'd never starred on Broadway. He knew he needed to shmooze but had never felt comfortable on the New York party circuit. "I wasn't having the success I thought I deserved. I felt depressed, tight, preoccupied with work, work, work." After a series of phone calls, he and Myrick devised an unusual strategy. They decided that the Vermont-raised Hickok needed to spend more time outdoors. "She helped me set up a week-long trip to the desert canyonlands of Utah. And then I started camping once a month. And it really turned my life around. I felt more relaxed, more in balance." Myrick also encouraged him to hire a manager to help him network. Eventually Hickok landed a major role in a Broadway drama. Now he's starring in Elton John's hit musical "Aida." "Coaches are like directors," he says. "They sit down and take a really detailed look at your life, listen to what's going on, the way directors watch rehearsals. They cut through the stuff you get buried under and really help you clarify where you are in your life and get perspective."

Malcolm Eade, 37, felt "like a deer in the headlights" after his promotion to division chief at a Johnson & Johnson company in Toronto. He had just split from his girlfriend, was moving into a new home, and felt so stressed he was eating poorly and skipping the workouts that had carried him through numerous triathlons. Eade's boss encouraged him to sign on with personal coach Karen Graham. She listened to his story, then asked him to make lists and set goals: "ten things you are grateful for, ten great habits to get into, five work priorities, five things that can wait." Eade decided to praise his staff daily, read for half an hour nightly, and call his parents every week. Selling his motorcycle and decorating his home were shelved. "A coach is a person who holds you accountable to yourself," said Eade, who is so pleased with his progress he plans on sticking with his coach for another year. "A coach has no other agenda besides supporting you and helping you develop. I feel terrific now. I am comfortable with my position and centered enough to handle some very challenging decisions in the year ahead."