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Life coaches help clients move forward

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Denny Gill was 56 years old and stuck.

He'd just come out of a relationship and felt down and unmotivated. In need of a game plan, he decided to hire a coach — in this case, a life coach.

“Quite a few things had happened, and I just couldn't move forward,” said Mr. Gill, a general contractor from Sylvania Township. “I didn't think it was to the point where I needed psychological help. I just needed a push.”

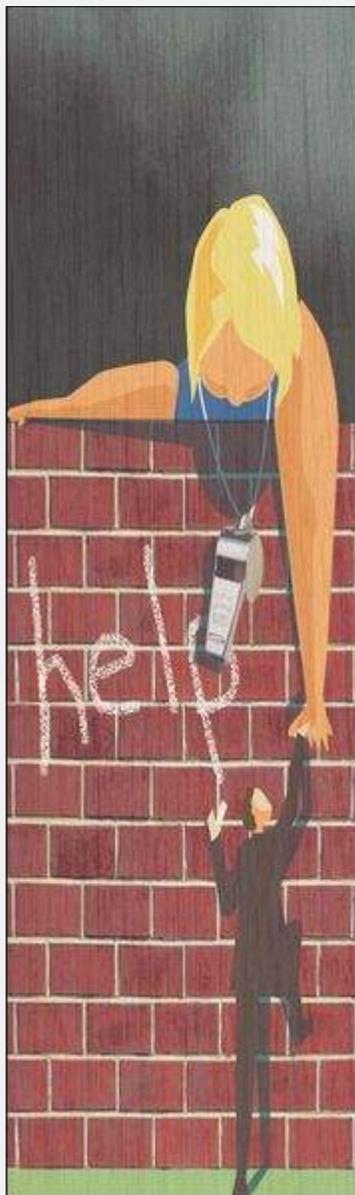
His daughter saw an ad and helped put him in touch with Sue McMahon, a credentialed life coach in West Toledo. Before long, something clicked.

“She made me reflect on who I am,” said Mr. Gill, now 59. “She didn't say: ‘You should do this. You should do that.’ That's what I was rejecting from my friends and everybody else. She let me discover what I should do. She knew how to ask the right questions.”

Mr. Gill, who also hired a personal trainer, came away revitalized and feeling like himself again. He is one of a growing number of people who are seeking help from professional life coaches. These clients are not just high-priced business executives looking to climb the corporate ladder; they're factory workers and teachers trying to find themselves, small-business owners and attorneys missing the mark on personal goals.

A career that's developed over the last decade, coaching now claims an estimated 30,000 professionals worldwide, including life coaches and others focusing on niches like career transition or retirement, according to the International Coach Federation, or ICF, a membership organization headquartered in Lexington, Ky.

Life coaches are different from therapists or consultants. They are interested in maximizing the potential of their clients, but not by making a diagnosis, prescribing a solution, or focusing on the past. They say they're more forward-looking.



(BLADE ILLUSTRATION/JEFF BASTING)

Past offers clues

“People nowadays, they don’t really want to stay in the past,” said Alison “Doc Ali” Arnold, an Arizona life coach who has a PhD in clinical psychology and who helped coach actor Scott Baio on the VH1 reality show, *Scott Baio is 45 ... and Single*.

“Even though your past has important clues to what’s going on in your life right now, I think people really want something that’s very action-oriented,” she continued. “And that’s the difference between traditional psychotherapy and life coaching.”

Critics, though, worry that could mean a disservice for clients who really do have psychological disorders.

“The problem is that a person who is in true need of a more bona fide service provider may think that they can make do with a coach,” said David Fresco, an associate professor at Kent State University who has a doctorate in clinical psychology.

The unregulated nature of the life coaching field creates other possible pitfalls, he said.

“The controversy for me is the fact that, as best as I can see, there is not a uniform way of training people in life coaching, and the consumer, who is seeking advice from a life coach, has a very difficult time evaluating that person’s credentials,” Mr. Fresco said.

Even those in the field admit there can be issues.

“Anyone can call themselves a coach,” said Ann Belcher, ICF marketing coordinator. That’s why the organization advises potential clients to do their research before hiring a coach.

The federation encourages coaches to seek training at a coaching school, and it offers a credentialing process to coaches as a means of self-regulating the industry. More than 3,000 coaches hold a credential from the ICF, which has 11,500 members.

The group’s code of ethics also calls on them to suggest that their clients seek the services of other professionals when deemed appropriate or necessary.

Question your coach

Miss Belcher encourages potential clients to question their coaches about their experience, training, whether or not they are credentialed, and what the process will be like.

In the case of Ms. McMahon, the life coach in West Toledo, she attended the Coaches Training Institute in California and went on to become credentialed by the ICF. Through her business, *Living From the Heart*, the former registered nurse helps people who are going through divorces or downsizing to rediscover their values and who they really are. Seated in a room with plush leather furniture and a soothing (fake) fire, she asks probing questions and guides a free-flowing dialogue about values.

A review of a client’s core values might suggest that they’re not following through with a goal because it’s not in line with what they really want after all. Or she might help a client get over a negative experience that contributed to low self-esteem by reframing it in a more positive light that hadn’t been considered before.

“You learn that the client has the answers. Your job is just to be curious,” Ms. McMahon said.

For \$400 a month, clients typically meet with her for two one-hour sessions, either in person or by phone. They also get additional support from her in between sessions via the phone and Internet. (The international average is \$136.36 per hour, according to the ICF.)

Ms. McMahon recently completed a three-month contract with Nancy Levkus, a 58-year-old factory worker from West Toledo who needed help restarting her life after a divorce led her to move back to her hometown and she sensed depression threatening.

“I was just plain stuck,” she said, using the word so many of Ms. McMahon’s clients find to describe their situation. “It seemed like there were several projects in my life that I had decided to pursue that I didn’t follow through on. ... I felt kind of paralyzed.”

She had seen other types of professional counselors, but it was having a life coach that finally helped her re-evaluate her goals — ditching some as inappropriate to her true nature, following through on others.

She said she’s seen things improve in her attitude at work, with family, and even at home. In the past, Ms. Levkus had been unable even to bring herself to move out of her cramped apartment; now she’s found a bigger place and designated a room as the office, where she can pursue one of her dreams: writing.

“I wanted to do it all my life, but never just began. Well, I have begun and I have some really exciting ideas,” she said.

Another client, Janet Frederick, 58, of South Toledo, said Ms. McMahon helped her get unstuck after she retired from teaching elementary school physical education and was training future teachers at Bowling Green State University.

LIFE COACHING BY THE NUMBERS

- **30,000:** Estimated number of professional coaches in the world, including life coaches and other niches.
 - **Over 3,000:** Number of coaches credentialed by the International Coach Federation. (Coaching is an unregulated industry and special training is not mandated. Their services are not covered by health insurance.)
 - **\$136.36:** Average hourly wage for life coaches globally.
- SOURCE: International Coach Federation

“I was feeling as if I had met the challenges in my life and had met my goals and ... I was like, there’s got to be more. But I just did not know where to go and what to do,” she said.

After hashing things out with her life coach, she ended up going to Seattle on the spur of the moment for training in an exciting form of dance that she has since incorporated into her college classes.

“I don’t know that I would have ever had the courage to just book the flight, book the workshop, and go,” she said.

Not everyone is sold in the idea of professional life coaches. The Daily Show has poked fun at the profession, joking, “So a life coach is like having a really good friend who charges.”

But according to Heather Bradley, a credentialed coach in West Toledo who is president of the local ICF chapter, there’s definitely a need in our modern society.

“If people were able to overcome these obstacles or barriers in their life,” she said, “they’d be doing it themselves.”

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