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Stuck in Neutral? Call a Personal Coach

Marian Hyder wanted a divorce, but she couldn't bring herself to act. She and her husband tried marriage counseling. She went to a therapist. Neither made her feel better or helped her decide what to do. "I didn't want to just rehash my childhood anymore," she says.

"I wanted to move my life forward."

So Hyder did something that more and more people are doing: She hired a coach.

Coaches, also called personal or life coaches, help clients clarify thoughts and overcome hesitations to achieve their goals, which can be personal, professional or both. Coaches "seek to elicit solutions and strategies from the client," reads a professional description on the website of the International Coach Federation (www.coachfederation.org). "The coach's job is to provide support to enhance the skills, resources and creativity that the client already has."

Business is booming. The International Coach Federation, or ICF, reports that about 30,000 coaches in more than 80 countries this year will generate \$1.5 billion worth of business. The ICF's membership is roughly 12,000 — up from 2,000 in 1999.

Hyder, of Bethesda, contacted Susan Braverman, a Bethesda-based coach and the vice president and president-elect of ICF's Metro D.C. chapter. Braverman, Hyder says, gave her the "clarity" to decide, once and for all, to go through with a divorce. While hiring a coach might seem a bit Californian for a New Englander like Hyder, she says the abstractions and exercises that Braverman led her through helped her achieve a very tangible goal. In one exercise, Braverman asked Hyder to imagine her life in 20 years. "She asked me to paint a picture of my house, my emotions, where I was in my life," Hyder says. "And then she had my present self knock on the door and have a conversation with my future self."

She did it. "I pictured a house with a stone fireplace and a porch overlooking the ocean, and myself feeling settled and happy," Hyder says. This and other images gave her the "information" she needed to change her life. The divorce went smoothly, Hyder says.

Before beginning as a coach, Braverman worked as a licensed therapist and social worker, spending several years counseling trauma and crisis victims in the workplace. In 2002 she was certified by the ICF, one of the two main coach-certifying organizations.

The group was formed in 1995 by practitioners who sought to raise the profession's standing by creating a uniform set of credentials. The ICF issues certificates at three levels: associate, professional and master certified coach, based on the number of training hours and the amount of time spent working with clients.

The explosion of the coaching business is an outgrowth of the self-help movement and society's increased familiarity with psychotherapy, says Ann Belcher, marketing coordinator for the ICF, based in Lexington, Kentucky.

But coaching is not therapy, Susan Braverman emphasizes. "Coaches don't work with people who are mentally ill," she says. If she senses that a client needs psychological help, she will make a referral. But it was her work with psychotherapy clients that pointed her toward coaching. "It was clear that many of the people I worked with were not

mentally ill but were going through normal, albeit difficult, transitions: loss of a job, the end of a relationship," she says.

Why pay a coach when you could talk over coffee with a wise friend? Is there a difference?

Coaches and their clients say there is, describing the coaching relationship as much more productive. "You can talk to your family and friends, but you realize at a certain point they don't want to hear about it anymore," Hyder says. "They may tell you what they think you want to hear."

Says coach Elizabeth Lilley: "The main difference is a friend may have an agenda for you and ideas about what would be best for you. Coaching brings objectivity — no assumptions."

Lilley, who lives in Baltimore, has been coaching for almost four years. Before that she worked as a business systems analyst and program manager at T. Rowe Price. "A lot of my work actually involved leading team members and mentoring," she says. When her team was dismantled, she found herself helping employees cope with change and career decisions. "I was honing my coaching skills without even realizing it."

Now Lilley works mostly with mid- to upper-level management clients in the financial services and information technology industries.

Lilley's coaching fees begin at about \$500 per month. That stipend allows a client four hours of in-person or telephone time with her. Most coaches follow a similar formula, offering packages based on the amount of time spent talking with a client.

Jodi Hume, a Baltimore-based coach, offers a "whatever it takes" option, which can include several phone conversations per week. Hume also does homework, or research, for her clients. Hume's client Tracey Myers-Preston is gearing up to launch a business devoted to "positive family life."

"I've been toying with the idea for years," Myers-Preston says. Working with Hume has helped her focus on how to bring the project to life. When they first met to discuss her plan, Myers-Preston says, Hume asked what she had in mind — a series of classes, a Web presence, a book? "I didn't have a clue," Myers-Preston says.

Within a few months of starting work with Hume, Myers-Preston had created a website with a designer as well as an online shop. She plans to launch the business, called The Family Muse, this fall.

Hume compares coaching to helping someone parallel park from the sidewalk. "You can see the space — it's so easy to know the angle they should be turning and how much room they have. But the person sitting in the car has all these blind spots and is worried about hitting something."

For information about coaching or to find a certified coach, visit the International Coach Federation at www.coachfederation.org or the Coaches Training Institute at www.thecoaches.com.