

March 6, 2008

FITNESS

On the Other End of the Line, Discipline

By BRAD MELEKIAN

Correction Appended

“CLOSE your eyes, breathe deeply, and imagine yourself at your most well. What does it look like?”

The voice on the other end of the phone belonged to neither a guru nor my primary doctor, but to a wellness coach, and the question wasn't rhetorical. The coach, Dr. Julie Desch of Palo Alto, Calif., wanted me to “paint a picture with words.”

Such is the initial session with a wellness coach — essentially a life coach for your body. You say what you want to do to be healthier, and you are told to do it, together you work on the how, and you pay \$50 to \$150 for the hour on the phone. Counseling is rarely done in person.

While executive coaches help the ambitious and life coaches offer direction to the aimless, wellness coaches are the fitness industry's version of a paid motivator. Not so long ago, their clients were those with injuries, illness or pounds to shed, but more recently coaches have been making a play for the perfection-minded, and their motto seems to be “You can always be more fit!”

By helping clients identify goals, coaches say, they can assist people in making behavioral changes that lead to weight loss, more regular exercise or a victory on competition day.

After I completed an online “well-being assessment” that asked about my “energy drains and energy boosters,” medical history and nutrition and exercise habits, Dr. Desch told me that I was only 74 percent well. Apparently, sitting at a desk and eating a steady diet of burritos does not lead to optimal health.

Wellness coaches, often hired by corporations as preventive medicine, are now being sought out more often by individuals, coaches say. And the number of those coaches is growing. In 2000, Wellcoaches, an alliance whose training program is endorsed by the American College of Sports Medicine, trained 100 coaches. Last year, it trained 1,000.

“We're seeing this as a continuing trend over the last two years,” said Walter Thompson, a professor of kinesiology at Georgia State University who surveyed fitness trends last year. “We think wellness coaching is today where personal training was 20 years ago.”

I found Dr. Desch, a Stanford-educated pathologist and certified personal trainer, through Wellcoaches. After I told her what my barriers to wellness were — the words “work” and “life in general” escaped my lips — we established simple goals for the next three months. It would help, I said, if I ate home-cooked dinners with my wife instead of takeout at my desk, and I'd feel better if

I re-established a lapsed exercise routine. Dr. Desch asked me to make dinner arrangements with my wife, to pick up a yoga-class schedule and to plan to reconvene in a week.

Because the industry is unregulated, there is no way to tell how many people call themselves wellness coaches. What qualifies a person to be a coach is also murky.

Type “wellness coach” into an online search engine and you’ll find an assortment of characters, many with little to no discernible background in either the medical or exercise fields. Some have self-published books with titles that vaguely reference “holistic” health. Frothy self-help jargon is common. (“It’s time to get un-stuck ... in concentrated you-time,” one site reads.)

But educated and well-trained coaches can make a difference, clients, coaches and fitness professionals said. “A coach is somebody who can use behavior-modification techniques effectively,” Dr. Thompson said. “Some personal trainers can do that, but most can’t.”

Rather than viewing wellness coaches as adversaries, trainers are succumbing to the coaching phenomenon. “We’re seeing some trainers looking to expand their reach by going into wellness coaching,” said Cedric Bryant, the chief science officer at the American Council on Exercise. “It could be a complementary matchup,” Dr. Bryant said.

While wellness coaches are expected to be knowledgeable about fitness, their main function is more psychological. But Charles A. Maher, a professor of psychology at Rutgers, worries that coaches may present themselves as having more expertise than they do. “If somebody wants to sit down with someone else and talk about their goals and life direction, that happens every day in any corporation,” Dr. Maher said. “Some people might just call that mentoring.”

Wellness coaches can earn \$50,000 to \$150,000 a year. To train with Wellcoaches, which offers a 13-week online program for \$895, applicants need a health or fitness credential, like personal training certification. “We’re not selling snake oil here,” said Dino Costanzo, the chairman of the A.C.S.M.’s committee on certification. “But there are people out there who certainly are.”

Ms. Moore, the founder of Wellcoaches, is helping start a coaching psychology initiative in Massachusetts, a collaboration between McLean Hospital and Harvard Medical School, which would promote research into the fields of coaching and develop more effective training.

Mary Mahoney, 29, of San Jose, Calif., is a registered dietitian who, while healthy, felt “stuck at a plateau” in her exercise regimen. She sought out a coach and not a trainer, she said, because “I knew that I could figure out the technique, but I didn’t know how to incorporate it into my routine in such a way that it would stick.”

Working with a wellness coach for the past year (at an hourly rate of \$75), she has taken up an all-body exercise program, lost 10 pounds and increased her lung function.

Not surprisingly, you can also hire a computer program as your wellness coach at Web sites like wellpeople.com (\$39.95 a year). Dr. Desch said she tried it and was impressed.

The City of Las Vegas and organizations like Coca-Cola, Sherwin-Williams and Con-way Freight have hired wellness coaches in the last few years.

Cincom, a software development company in Cincinnati, began offering coaching services to employees in January. One employee said it has already paid off for him. Dave Schwarber, a 55-year-old executive, said someone from Wellcoaches helped him effect simple lifestyle changes to lose 25 pounds.

With two knee replacements causing pain and work stress keeping him up at night, Mr. Schwarber, who had worked with a personal trainer after an injury, said he wanted to try a different approach. “If someone tells me what to do, I’m not going to do it. With the wellness coach, you set your own goals.”

Mr. Schwarber said his coach helped him put into practice “simple stuff” like portion control and exercise routines like riding a stationary bike and working with free weights.

As for me, I was surprised to report to Dr. Desch that the week since our session had gone well. My wife and I had actually cooked together each night, and I had not only picked up a yoga schedule, but made it to a few classes.

This, Dr. Desch said, is the effectiveness of wellness coaching — helping a client take goals from the abstract to small, achievable tasks. But considering the price, I wondered if I might have achieved the same changes with a list of goals on a notepad and stepped-up resolve. On the other hand, I hadn’t taken action on my goals until a coach made me accountable.

Mr. Schwarber said that it was exactly that — accountability — that helped him lose weight. He tells the story of relating his success to a colleague.

“What happens if you don’t follow through on the goals you set?” the colleague asked.

“Nothing,” Mr. Schwarber answered. “You just don’t do it.”

Correction: March 20, 2008

An article on March 6 about the growing popularity of wellness coaches misstated the credentials of one coach, Dr. Julie Desch. She is a certified personal trainer, not a certified athletic trainer. Certified athletic trainers must have, among other requirements, a bachelor’s or master’s degree in athletic training. Although Dr. Desch does have a medical degree, certified personal trainers do not need higher education in the health sciences.

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