

FIRST-CLASS coaching

Demand for life coaches is growing, but the area remains poorly regulated and researched — therein creating an opportunity for psychologists.

BY TORI DEANGELIS

Like many psychology graduate students, Ben Dean, PhD, struggled to finish his dissertation. He sought help from a cognitive-behavioral psychologist, but when that didn't work, he enlisted the aid of a former fellow student. Through supportive coaching, she had him commit to six goals a week, and if he didn't meet them, she asked probing questions to get to the heart of his problem.

Six months later, Dean had typed the last sentence. "If I hadn't worked with her, I could have easily dragged on for months or even years," he says.

The experience made a huge impact on Dean, who went on to become a licensed psychologist and to found MentorCoach, one of the nation's first life and executive coaching institutes and one of the few that mainly trains and is taught by licensed mental health professionals.

"Coaching has allowed me to help people transform their lives, to build a flourishing practice, and to do all kinds of other interesting things like writing and speaking here and abroad," he says. "It's done that for other people, too."

But not everyone in the life-coaching field shares Dean's expertise. The field is as unregulated as it is mushrooming: Its main trade group, the International Coach Federation (ICF), boasts of 17,000 members and counting. The lack of regulation

means that anyone — including those without any training in behavioral science — can become a life coach, says psychologist Vicki Vandaveer, PhD, an executive coach based in Houston.

What's more, the coaching field lacks a solid research base, and there's little agreement among coaches on what constitutes its core education and training requirements, Vandaveer says.

Psychologists may be put off by these factors and feel concerned about lesser-trained practitioners attempting to counsel people outside of their expertise. Yet the coaching field is a terrific fit for psychologists, who have the expertise and skills to enhance the field's credibility, says psychologist Jeffrey E. Auerbach, PhD, founder and president of the College of Executive Coaching, which trains only those with graduate degrees and uses psychological theory as a guide.

"Psychologists have the most training of any profession in understanding human motivation, behavior, learning and change," he says. "And if they've done clinical work, they have a depth of one-on-one experience far greater than that of people who aren't mental health professionals. Coaching is actually a

Dr. Carol Kauffman oversees the Institute of Coaching, a nonprofit organization at Harvard Medical School's McLean Hospital dedicated to enhancing the scientific foundation and credibility of coaching.



Evan Richman

great fit with what most of us already do.”

Interested in coaching? Auerbach and others suggest that you:

• **Learn the territory.** Moving from psychotherapy to life coaching isn't difficult, but it does require a shift in focus.

“In therapy, your goal is healing. In coaching, you're

A unique coaching niche

Psychologist and coach Alan Graham, PhD, has created a specialty coaching practice that seeks to bring order and goal attainment to some of the people who struggle with it most: clients with attention-deficit disorder. The challenges these clients face include difficulty with executive functioning, the “administrative secretary” of the brain that keeps things organized and tells you what to do next.

“Some people with ADD have lived their lives with things not working out for them, and as a consequence, feel that they're no good,” says Graham. “Coaching helps them realize they can be something else.” Graham helped one client, a young man with ADD who had failed at one college, succeed academically and return to his institution. Chief among the strategies they developed together was a weekly schedule the client was accountable for — a kind of external “executive function.” Now, “he's on top of everything,” says Graham.

Graham helped another client, a man in his 40s, accept the reality of his condition and make changes accordingly. Like many people with ADD, the client's spouse had “great executive functioning,” took over that role for him, and often chastised him for his lack of organization and impulsivity.

Graham and his client worked together to distinguish which of his behaviors were caused by ADD, and which weren't. Being chronically late, for instance, turned out not to be a function of laziness or inconsideration, but rather his difficulty keeping track of time. Conversely, balking at a chore was sometimes just laziness. In both cases, Graham worked with the man to accept responsibility for his actions and come up with ways to live more effectively.

The work can result in an unfamiliar but welcome realization for people with ADD: They are in charge of their lives.

“They learn to accept themselves in a whole new light,” says Graham.

—T. DeANGELIS

following the trail of dreams. When you see little sparks of interest, excitement or increased energy, that's where to go,” says psychologist Carol Kauffman, PhD, director of the Institute of Coaching, a nonprofit organization at Harvard Medical School's McLean Hospital dedicated to enhancing the scientific foundation and credibility of coaching. Coaches use such methods as helping clients verbalize their desires and set goals to achieving them; asking questions to help them overcome obstacles to those goals; and encouraging them to enlist allies for support, she says.

Coaching and therapy clients differ, too, at least in theory. These clients are supposedly “healthier” than traditional therapy clients and seek to attain excellence or extraordinary results in their lives, says Auerbach. (That said, many high-functioning people are depressed or anxious, and these people may benefit from coaching if they're also getting mental health counseling in psychotherapy to address mental health issues.) Auerbach helped one client — a clergyman facing burnout — develop a dormant love of creative writing. Dean's coaching enabled a woman to realize her goal of winning a seat on her city council.

Coaches also claim a more egalitarian relationship with clients, developing a “co-creative” relationship to achieve client goals — though some therapy schools certainly share a similar model. In general, coaches believe clients have innate strengths and can make their own decisions, so they deploy strategies accordingly. These include active listening and asking questions that help people tap their own wisdom and holding the person accountable for what they say they want.

In a similar vein, coaches may insert themselves into the work more than they do in therapy, where personal neutrality is used to protect the patient's emotions, says Auerbach.

“My clients are going to know that I'm married, that I have two kids, and they might even know the age of my kids,” he says. “Most people drawn to coaching enjoy the fact that they can be more open with their clients.”

Unlike therapy, coaching is not reimbursable by insurance. While that might sound like a liability, coaches and clients alike say it's a service worth paying for out of pocket.

Another difference? Coaches often do their work by phone, which allows them to work with any client, from anywhere, says Dean. “You have the freedom to work in your office, go out on your deck, walk outside or work from the beach” — or for that matter, do sessions while you're on vacation, he says. This factor makes coaching an attractive pre-retirement segue for psychologists, Dean and others say.

• **Get training.** To get a taste of the area, attend a coaching class that offers continuing-education credit, read relevant literature, and consider getting consultation or supervision from a psychologist or other mental health professional who has coaching expertise. If you want to dive deeper, think about attending a coaching institute. If you're working, the process — much of it done via teleconference — takes about a year and a half, and you can start seeing clients midway

through training, says Dean. Look for programs designed for mental health professionals, which are more rigorous and more in line with your training than others. Good programs will also teach you creative ways to market yourself, those involved add.

• **Develop a niche.** Depending on your background and interests, consider developing a coaching specialty. Many psychologists, of course, are involved in executive coaching, which has a more extensive — though still relatively young — empirical base compared with life coaching. But psychologists

Wanted: coaching researchers

By far the weakest aspect of the life coaching world is its lack of empirical backing, say psychologists.

“If you listen to people who have received coaching, you know it has much to offer in terms of attaining personal goals and the joy that comes from that, but we need studies to back that up,” says psychologist Susan David, PhD, co-director of the Institute of Coaching at Harvard University's McLean Hospital.

With their strong research focus, psychologists are key people to make this happen. There's already much potential crossover: Psychological theories related to intrinsic motivation, goal performance, behavior regulation and well-being have not been fully translated into coaching studies, but could be, for example. Likewise, it would make sense to take what is known to work in psychotherapy and apply it to coaching, but few have done that, David adds.

Positive psychology findings are another natural translation point, says psychologist Carol Kauffman, PhD, the Harvard institute's director.

“Coaches believe that clients are resourceful and whole, that working with strengths is a good idea, and that accessing positive emotions is a resource for the person,” she says. “There are now hundreds of studies in positive psychology that support that orientation.”

To help develop this nascent research area, the Harvard institute (www.instituteofcoaching.org) awards \$100,000 a year in grants for coaching research, the only private foundation to do so. The institute is eager for proposals with scientific rigor, adds Kauffman.

Other countries may be further along this research path. At the University of Sydney in Australia, for instance, psychologist Anthony M. Grant, PhD, is director of a coaching psychology unit that offers master's-level coaching psychology

are plumbing other specialty niches as well. Ellen Ostrow, PhD, based in the Washington, D.C., area, has built a successful practice coaching female attorneys. ADD specialist Alan Graham, PhD, of Chicago, offers coaching for people with the condition (see sidebar on page 50). Others are providing coaching in health, career-building and performance issues. If you do go the specialty route, bear in mind you need to develop added expertise.

• **Consider other roles in coaching.** Psychologists can provide training, research the area (see sidebar below), and write or lecture on the topic. Dean, for instance, pens three

degrees, conducts extensive research on coaching and is one of the few research-oriented university-based coaching programs in the world.

He began work in the area in 1997, when he developed a solution-focused, cognitive-behavioral model of coaching that used goal attainment as a central feature. Since then, he and colleagues have conducted a number of coaching-outcome studies, including six randomized-controlled trials looking at the effectiveness of coaching in business, education and health settings. They're also developing evidence-based approaches to executive and personal coaching.

The coaching psychology unit also is pioneering new approaches to goal attainment in coaching, testing the idea that for some high-powered people, goal attainment may be as much about doing less as doing more. This effort, which has \$3.5 million of government backing, combines mindfulness training with coaching and leadership development. It aims to determine whether mindfulness can improve goal attainment, says Grant.

“We predict that by taking time for mindfulness practices, these executives will develop an ability to take alternative perspectives on problems they might face, and the ability to reduce stress,” says Grant.

Grant hopes psychologists get more involved in coaching and coaching research, areas he believes they initially ignored because they considered it too much like pop psychology.

“People want to improve their lives, they want to reach their goals, they want to learn how to be more successful,” he says. “Coaches who were arguably far less trained than psychologists stepped in to fill that need, while we stood on the sidelines. We need to engage in the coaching enterprise and find out which techniques really work.”

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coaching newsletters with a worldwide readership of 150,000, and gives frequent lectures and workshops around the country.

Another vital role is educating the public on the differences between psychotherapy and coaching, including the level and types of training required for each, knowledgeable psychologists say. That can include the fact that unlike most coaches, psychologists are licensed, a process that takes years of training and is explicitly designed to protect the public from malpractice, says Lynn Bufka, PhD, APA's assistant executive director for practice research and policy.

Vandaveer would also like to see psychologists differentiate coaching performed by qualified psychologists from coaching conducted by those without advanced degrees in human behavior and to create a clear taxonomy of coaching. Psychologists should work to specify required training, credentialing and continuing education in coaching, she believes.

"We need to be great at what we do, and then educate the world about what psychology can do," she says. ■

Tori DeAngelis is a writer in Syracuse, N.Y.

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