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## Personal trainers for the perplexed: life coaches on the rise

By Joshua Partlow

Bianca Pujol was unhappy with her job as a waitress in Midtown Manhattan and often suffered anxiety attacks. She had tried therapy, yoga, exercise, and antidepressants, but still could not overcome her gloom. Then she found a life coach.

"I feel so much better and I actually get things done now," said Pujol, a 24-year-old graduate of New York University, who began weekly telephone sessions with a coach, Laurie Morrell, in October. They discussed her values, her career goals. Then Pujol was given homework assignments to research other employment options that meshed with her interests, from working at a zoo to event planning. "I feel a lot more organized now, I know what I'm working towards and I know that I'm taking the right steps," she said.

Pujol is one of the increasing numbers of people employing the services of life coaches, who serve as personal trainers for perplexed personalities. The faltering national economy, and the violence of Sept. 11, have bolstered the growth of coaching, a decade-old movement that thrives on finding clients who are at a crossroads in their lives, and want help establishing a new direction.

"I think that Sept. 11 has been a wake-up call for people," said Morrell. "People are examining their lives and asking hard questions about what they want to be doing, and saying, 'If I were going to die tomorrow, am I happy about what I have done so far, and am living in a way that I would be proud of?'"

Marian Morgan, 49, a Manhattan coach who was trained as a conventional psychotherapist, has watched her coaching practice take off in recent months. "There has been a big spike," Morgan said, whose 16 clients are scattered around the country, including Georgia, Virginia and California.

According to the International Coach Federation, over 10,000 coaches are practicing in the United States. "The profession has grown very dramatically," said Bonnie Mincu, vice president of the federation's New York chapter. "The attendance at our national conference has almost doubled every year for the last several years." After Sept. 11, Mincu organized a program for distraught New Yorkers to receive free coaching. "My business shut down for a week, I had such an outpouring of response," she said.

Unlike traditional counseling, almost all coaching is done over the telephone. A coach generally works with 10 to 20 clients, who have 45-minute weekly sessions, costing on average \$100 each. Coaches who specialize in corporate clients will often charge as much as \$5,000 a month. The customer usually determines an objective, such as improving relationships, career or personal fulfillment. The coach discusses ways to attain these goals.

"It's not counseling or therapy, because you're not getting into real deep-seated motivations that have to do with their past or childhood," Mincu said. "It's really focused on the present and the future, and on behavior and actions they can take to create a life they want."

The movement began in 1992, when Thomas Leonard, a financial planner, founded the two-year training program Coach U, based in Colorado Springs. The current chief executive officer of Coach U, Sandy Vilas, has watched his school -- taught with teleconferenced classes -- grow dramatically. "When I bought the business in 1996, it had 500 students and graduates. Today we've got 7,000 students and graduates in 36 countries," said Vilas, a coach himself. "It's growing at the rate of anywhere between 100 and 125 new coaches a month."

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There are no prerequisites to starting a coaching practice beyond owning a telephone, and there are no licensing requirements. Certification from Coach U -- or one of the many smaller schools such as the Academy for Coach Training or Results Life Coaching -- may look nice on a resume, but is not necessary to practice. There is also no typical professional background shared by coaches. Morrell, for instance, majored in business logistics at Pennsylvania State University, then worked for Kraft Foods for five years, followed by six years in the software industry, before she enlisted the help of a life coach in 1999.

"My coach is just amazing," Morrell said. "She's an angel. I worked through what my values were, and one of my core values is helping people." This led to her decision to launch her own practice. Her clients include engineers, health care professionals and a bike messenger.

The easy entry into the profession has worried some experienced coaches, who fear a dilution of quality in the field. "Some of my colleagues are no longer calling themselves coaches because they don't want to be associated with unskilled people," said Ken Kesslin, founder of Kesslin Associates, who coaches executives from companies such as Pfizer, Salomon Smith Barney and the Westchester Medical Center.

Outside the field, there are many critics of life coaching in general. Some psychotherapists do not buy into the phenomenon, and complain that coaches are overpaid and undertrained.

"I find it really unappealing personally," said Martin Naidoff, the director of Psychotherapy Associates, an outpatient therapy center in Manhattan. "It's a phony endeavor. You tell people how to do things, it's not going to help you do things yourself. It's somebody you're going to become dependent on.

"I think real therapists see them as sellouts, who have found a way to make easy money. It's really antithetical to the goals of therapy, which are personal growth, and helping solve interpsychic conflicts."

Regardless of such skepticism, the coaching momentum appears to be growing, and reaching a higher level of mainstream recognition.

"More people are becoming aware of what we do now," Kesslin said. "You don't have to tell so many people anymore that you're not a football coach."