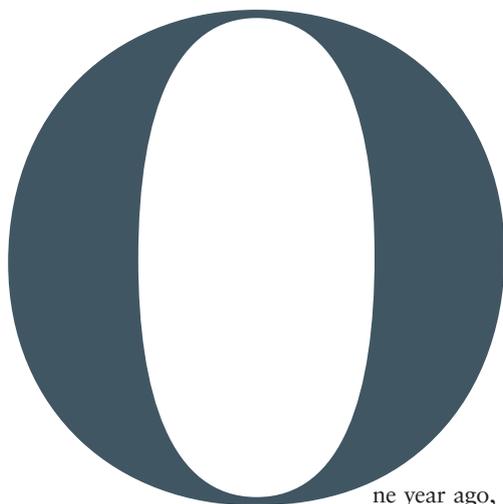


The Path to Wellness

Want to get fit, eat better or streamline a busy life?
A coach may be just what you need.

BY ALICE BRADLEY ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES STEINBERG



One year ago, Kristin Swartzlander found herself at a turning point. The 28-year-old motorsports marketing consultant was happily married and running a successful business, but constant fatigue and frequent migraines made it difficult for her to enjoy life. She thought she was taking care of herself, but it was evident that something needed to change. “I should have been feeling the best I’d ever felt,” she says. “And I wasn’t.” Looking for what she called “an aerial view” of her health, Kristin sought the help of Marissa Vicario, a certified wellness coach.

Little known as recently as a decade ago, wellness coaches are now increasingly in demand. Margaret Moore, CEO of Wellcoaches, characterizes

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the public’s interest in wellness as an “awakening.” “People are saying, ‘I’ve got my financial advisor, I’ve got my trainer, but what about the rest?’ It’s one thing to invest in finances for retirement, but if you don’t do the same thing for health you won’t have the resources to enjoy the wealth. People are waking up to realize that the longer you wait, the smaller the bank account is. If you invest in your health now, it’s going to pay back royally down the road.”

Think of the wellness coach as a health concierge: part nutritionist, part trainer, part cheerleader/guru. Eschewing the one-size-fits-all approach, wellness coaches work closely with clients to define their specific health and lifestyle goals. “I don’t tell people exactly what to do,” says Amélie Lamont, who runs Nerdy Girl Wellness. Instead, the coach and client assess where the client is, where he or she wants to go, and how he or she can get there. Swartzlander found that flexibility incredibly valuable. “Marissa never told me to do something, or told me I couldn’t have something. She always worked within what I told her was important to me. And she told me, you don’t have to be perfect.” As a driven professional with a perfectionist streak, that was exactly what Kristin needed to hear.

THE BIG PICTURE

While nutrition and exercise play an important role in wellness, an effective wellness coach looks beyond food and exercise. Lamont will “look at your career, your lifestyle, your relationships, your spirituality. If you’re in a horrible relationship or if you hate your job, it doesn’t matter what you’re putting into your body—you’re still not going to feel overall like a healthy and happy person.” Figuring out precisely what you want is, for many people, one of the biggest challenges. “People say they just want to lose that last five to ten pounds,” says Marissa Vicario, “but

when we get down to it there’s a lot more going on.” Wellness coaches spend their initial sessions with a client working to carve out a path. “Everybody arrives at their own goals in different ways. It’s very individual, very tailored to the person. We’ll talk about their challenges and then we come up with a game plan.” Creating a clear vision of where you want to go is important because “health is just the means, not the end,” Margaret Moore explains. “The end is the life you want to lead, the energy you need. Wellness is basically the fuel, the energy source.”

Cleaning up your health and lifestyle habits can head off serious medical challenges down the road. According to the World Health Organization, 60 percent of deaths worldwide are caused by chronic disease, the vast majority of which is preventable with health and lifestyle changes. “Roughly half of our health status is under our control,” Moore says. And if you’re already in the throes of a more serious condition, coaching can be an excellent complement to medical treatment. Several studies have shown the effectiveness of coaching for patients with chronic conditions such as diabetes, obesity and heart disease. In a randomized clinical trial, patients with Type 2 diabetes who were coached were more likely to take their medication and exercise regularly; they also reported less stress and higher “perceived health status.” As more studies confirm results like these, the medical community is growing more accepting of the wellness coach’s role. “Doctors have minimal nutritional training,” Vicario says. “They love to be able to refer someone to a wellness coach who can really take the time with a patient.”

SETTING PRIORITIES

Working with a wellness coach can provide profound and lasting benefits, but get ready to put some work into it. “The client does a lot of the work,” according

THE DETAILS ON COACHING

Cost: Expect to pay US\$50-150 per session.

Certification: There are numerous certification programs whose sites list coaches, searchable by area. Reputable programs include (but are not limited to) Wellcoaches (wellcoaches.school.com) and Real Balance Global Wellness Services (realbalance.com).

Referrals: Does your doctor know a good wellness coach? Your acupuncturist, therapist, personal trainer? Reach out to trusted health professionals.

Social media: If you find someone online, check out their social media activity. You can get an excellent feel for them after you’ve read their blog or newsletter, so get to know them a little before you

make a call. And don’t forget to check their Yelp reviews!

Try them out: The most important aspect of the dynamic is the relationship. Use the first session to get to know your coach. Do you click? Do you leave feeling energized and empowered? Good chemistry is more important than impressive credentials. Listen to your gut.



to Vicario. “They don’t necessarily see it, but I see it. They’re working really hard. I’m just holding the space for them to do that.” The more motivated the client and the harder they work, the more likely they are to effect lasting change. “If we don’t produce sustainable change,” Moore says, “we haven’t added value. The drivers of sustainability include really knowing why it matters to you, and then building confidence. You end up outgrowing your old lifestyle. When you look back a year later, you almost can’t remember what it was like.”

For Kristin Swartzlander, the changes she instituted with Vicario’s help are still going strong. She

overhauled her diet and identified her migraine triggers. Her energy levels were boosted by drinking more water, consuming enough healthy fats, and making exercise a priority. In addition, Vicario helped her strategize how best to eat on the road — sometimes literally. “When you work at a race track,” she says, “everything gets dirty.” As useful as these practical changes were to her health and happiness, simply receiving permission to prioritize self-care was perhaps the most valuable takeaway. “I had a lot of guilt around that. But if you don’t take care of yourself, you can’t take care of other people or your business.” □