

The Choice You Didn't Know You Had

An Inside Look at Life Coach Dr. Mario Simon's Transformational Work

By Jeanne Cotroneo Darrow

TO BEGIN, WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CERTIFIED LIFE COACH? HOW DO YOU HELP PEOPLE?

My work begins with understanding where people are in their growth journey—whether as parents, partners, leaders, employees, or friends. Most of us want to “show up” differently in at least one of these roles, and my job is to help identify what’s holding them back. People tend to externalize their obstacles: it’s the boss’s fault, the partner’s fault, the economy’s fault. My coaching flips that lens inward. I help clients see how they’re authentically showing up, what assumptions drive their behavior, and realize they have a choice. That awareness offers both emotional benefits, such as relief, happiness, and self-confidence, and practical benefits, including decisiveness, effectiveness, and improved relationships.

PLEASE SHARE AN EXAMPLE OF A GOAL A CLIENT SET AND THE TRANSFORMATION THAT FOLLOWED.

Just yesterday, I worked with a 63-year-old who has been the CEO of several public companies. When I asked my opening question—“How would you like to grow today?”—he said he struggled with intimacy. Professionally and personally, he was always jumping to the next thing, never fully present, always protecting himself.

In one session, we uncovered and addressed two things: first, the unconscious “programs” he’d been running his whole life; and second, the fact that he actually had choices he didn’t know existed. My point was not to dwell on his past but to help him see that the program was active today—and he could choose to operate differently. His capacity for intimacy skyrocketed that day.

YOU’RE KNOWN AS AN EARLY PIONEER IN BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS. CAN YOU EXPLAIN THAT FIELD?

Behavioral economics blends classical economic theory—the science of choice—with psychology, which examines human motivation. In essence, behavioral economics studies why people make the choices they make, and why those choices often defy rational expectations.

HOW DOES YOUR APPROACH DIFFER FROM TRADITIONAL THERAPY?

I love hearing people’s stories, but those stories don’t necessarily move the work forward. Many therapeutic modalities focus heavily on the past: what your father did, what your mother didn’t do, what happened 20 years ago. That can be meaningful, but it often doesn’t create transformation. My approach focuses on the current programs you’re running without even realizing it. Once you can see those patterns, you can choose whether to keep them or change them. We drop blame; we drop labels of pathology. We reclaim agency.

WHAT DOES A TYPICAL COACHING RELATIONSHIP LOOK LIKE?

I meet with clients weekly in the beginning, and we typically make rapid progress. I once worked with a 32-year-old who was convinced he was bipolar and depressive. Within two sessions, he was smiling nonstop—not because I’m dismissing clinical diagnoses, but because many people misinterpret conditioned emotional patterns as fixed traits.

Once clients begin seeing their own programs clearly, the change can feel almost humorous. They’ll say, “I’ve been doing this for 30 years!” And I’ll say, “Exactly. You can keep doing it for 30 more—or choose something different.”

TELL US MORE ABOUT YOU AND YOUR PERSONAL JOURNEY THAT LED YOU HERE.

I was born in Greece, eventually moved to the United States, and earned my PhD in Behavioral Economics at Yale. I’ve been a CEO for 25 years, a partner at Boston Consulting Group, and I built

one consulting firm from 12 employees to more than a thousand. Coaching was something I always did on the side because I loved it. Recently, I decided to commit to it fully.

I have a book coming out in March called *Free You From You*. The opening line is: “I am a stutterer.” I struggled with stuttering for 35 years. Then, in one session with my own coach, it disappeared. That experience changed everything for me. It showed me—viscerally—that so many limitations are simply “deficit programs” we don’t realize we’re choosing to run. We are trapped by stories of failure, fear, shame, and inadequacy—stories our minds create and encode. Pain is part of life. But the real suffering begins when our minds turn that pain into a story that hardens into identity. Deficit programs drive nearly every struggle we face—career stagnation, workplace conflict, personal estrangement, and atrophied marriages. But it doesn’t have to be this way. Like I chose to no longer stutter, the ability to notice and escape our own deficit programs unlocks collective potential in all of us.

YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS A VERY DIRECT COACH. WHAT DOES THAT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

My style is radical authenticity. I don’t sugarcoat or accept excuses. If someone says, “I meant to tell my wife that I love her,” I’ll say, “But you didn’t say it. What you did says everything about the program you’re running.” Growth begins at the end of your comfort zone. My job is to take people there—kindly, but firmly. It’s not comfortable, but it’s transformational.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN COACHING, AND WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT IT?

I have more than 4,500 hours of coaching over about 15 years. What I love most is helping people see in themselves what they haven’t yet seen. I believe everybody has a gift, and mine is to help others see what they don’t yet see in themselves.

IF SOMEONE WANTS TO BEGIN WORKING WITH YOU, WHAT’S THE FIRST STEP?

I offer a 45-minute conversation to see whether we’re truly a fit. The only requirement is that the person wants their transformation as much as I do. If that’s the case, the work that follows can be profoundly life-changing.

To schedule a consultation, call or email Dr. Simon at 917-419-9207 or mario.simon@aya.yale.edu. ♦



Dr. Mario Simon has traveled the world, sharing his expertise in behavioral economics and life coaching. He now lives with his family in the Hudson Valley and offers in-person or virtual sessions.