

To Score a Goal, Some Hire a Coach
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It's the start of a new year: time to lose 15 pounds, find a new love interest and start flossing.

Or, as some might say, time to take "achievable action steps toward a contract with yourself for renewed healthfulness and personal happiness." That's a New Year's resolution in the vernacular of a life coach, and it's the way more and more people are phrasing their January to-do lists.

For the life coach industry, in which clients can pay \$125 to \$250 an hour for one-on-one career or personal guidance, tapping into the January urge for self-improvement is a big business. The International Coach Federation, one of a handful of professional associations for personal and business coaches, boasts more than 11,000 members, up from 2,122 in 1999, according to the group's marketing coordinator, Ann Belcher. Many coaches are offering New Year's specials, pitching professional help for what was once a strictly amateur endeavor.

"The new year is such a clean marker -- it's a measuring stick that we've all agreed on in our society, and it really does draw a new crop into the fold," says Amy Ahlers of Electric Kites, a life coaching business in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Ahlers says she gets up to twice as many clients this time of year. Life coaching, she says, is "such a perfect springboard for people. They can see it's based in tangible results, it's not some airy-fairy, touchy-feely business."

But skeptics note that training programs and qualifications for life coaches vary widely, and the industry is not formally regulated.

While a number of life coaches have training in psychology or social work, certification requirements from some groups call for only six months of online study and 15 days of in-person training.

Ahlers, a former sales executive, and business partner Melissa McFarlane, a former actress and corporate trainer, received their credentials from the Coaches Training Institute of San Rafael, Calif., after about two years of study. They encourage clients to set two to four "worthy" goals in such areas as career, health, personal and spiritual; they then help clients break down these goals, they say, to make them feel achievable.

"We tell people to take a look at the home run for the year -- what would be a home run in each category?"

Other coaches are satisfied with base hits. For Ann Bernard, who runs LGS -- that's Life's Guiding Strategies -- in Lake Ridge, no resolution is too small. "There's always the famous flossing every day," she says, noting that daily dental hygiene can actually be more challenging than many other goals. "Some of the basic things, those are tricky," she says,

because your heart may not be in it.

Making a resolution that feels like a constant wrist-slap can also be self-defeating. "We don't allow anybody to set up a goal that's punishing," McFarlane says. In addition, she and Ahlers stress the importance of setting your own goal.

"You'd be shocked at how many people put a New Year's resolution on that their mother wants, not what they want," Ahlers says. With those parameters, and with the notion of a worthy goal at the outset, these coaches say it is possible to get out of the failed- resolution trap.

The key is to phrase the changes you want to make in a positive way. Ahlers suggests: "Don't say, 'I'm going to lose weight.' Say, 'I'm going to gain a body that will fit in this pair of pants.' You need specific and measurable goals." You also may need someone to help you measure them -- at least that's what life coaches are pitching. On their blog newyearresolutionblog.blogspot.com, Bernard and the other LGS coaches list lack of accountability as one of the most common reasons people lose their resolution resolve. Another obstacle? Making too big a resolution, a problem Bernard herself is steering clear of this year.

"I used to always want to learn sign language, but I don't think that's realistic. I already know not to set it because I know it's not going to come to pass."

Not that she's never embarked on an ambitious New Year's plan. Bernard spent 10 years in the Marine Corps and then -- after resolving to do "what made me happiest" -- started her own business. And while the life coach credential she got through an online school called Coach U was helpful, she considers the four- month tour she served in Iraq before finishing her course work essential to her training.

"In the Marines we certainly didn't talk a lot about resolutions. But we do know how to create a plan. We don't do anything without a plan."

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