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What in heck is life coach, anyway?

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She used to call herself a personal coach, but then everybody asked Exact Question No. 2: "What sport?"

When I've mentioned that I'm writing about life coaches, everybody asks the same question:

What the heck is that?

"I've heard that exact question before," life coach Judy Harrison said.

"A life coach is an individual trained to help others get their daily lives in better shape."

Instead of working on flattening abs, she and the dozen or so other life coaches working in the Richmond area focus on flattening obstacles to living the life their clients say they want.

Even if you haven't heard of life coaches, you may have heard of Cheryl Richardson, probably the best known among them, thanks to exposure on "Oprah" and her books, "Take Time for Your Life" and "Life Makeovers."

In fact, Richardson's first book inspired Harrison to change careers from interior designer to coach, though she says she realized she was already doing a lot of coaching when she helped people change the interiors of their homes.

She got her training the same place Richardson did, on the Internet at Coach University. Coaches are trained to listen, to observe and to ask the right questions.

Instead of telling clients what to do, they try to get them to figure out solutions for themselves. "You have everything that you need," Harrison said. "It's just a matter of recognizing your potential."

Harrison isn't the only person to make coaching her second career. Ingrid Schweickert switched to coaching from her old job as a case manager for a large HMO, where, she said, she learned people won't change unless they want to.

COACHING HELP

To find a coach, check the free referral service at the International Coach Federation's Web site. It allows users to narrow down their searches by answering questions about what kind of coach they want. That address is:

www.coachfederation.org

Other coaching Web sites:

- Coach University:
www.coachu.com
- Ingrid Schweickert:
www.coachingrid.com
- Judy Harrison:
www.judyharrison.com

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Work is different for her now: "I am a coach because I love to work with people who want to change and improve their lives."

Besides life coaches, there are also business coaches who focus on workplace issues.

You have to be motivated to hire a coach. Most charge between \$300 and \$500 a month for weekly phone sessions that last 30 to 45 minutes. Those usually are supplemented with unlimited e-mail exchanges and short phone calls in between.

When Rozanne Taylor heard about life coaches, she said she joked about it, saying, "I need more than a coach. I need a new life."

She knew that "a new life" was a tall order when she hired Schweickert. "I work with people who are facing life-threatening illnesses and death," Taylor said. "I just couldn't seem to get me in order.

"I felt that if I could get even a small part of my life under scrutiny and under better control, it might seep into the rest of my life."

When Susan Schoenberg considered hiring a life coach, her first question was, "Why not? I thought it would be great to have someone who was impartial to bounce ideas off of and who could help me focus on specific areas."

Working with Schweickert, she said, "I have learned to take more time for myself and to eliminate certain 'tolerations' from my life."

All busy people know what she means by "tolerations," those dreaded ought-to-do and should-do things that drain our energy.

"We're taught by society about all we have to do, need to do and should do," Harrison said. "People just want to have someone give them permission to be happy."

Giving people permission to be happy?

That's a heck of a job.

Conference all about coaching

Life and business coaches can fill up their coaching tool boxes this week at the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast Region Coaching Conference, which takes place Friday through Sunday at the Crowne Plaza Hotel.

Talane Miedaner, author of "Coach Yourself to Success," is a keynote speaker.

The Richmond Area Coaches Association, a local chapter of the International Coach Federation, is host for the conference.

Registration is open through tomorrow. The conference costs \$249, plus a \$49 pre-conference fee for a workshop Friday afternoon with former ICF President D.J. Mitsch. That workshop will focus on building and sustaining a thriving and fulfilling coaching business.

For the complete conference schedule, visit: www.greater-richmondcoaches.com

Questions? Call Judy Harrison at (804) 690-5677.

To register, call Ingrid Schweickert at (804) 754-7899.

Jann's column appears on Sundays and Wednesdays. Write her at P.O. Box 85333, Richmond, VA 23293; call (804) 649-6820; fax (804) 649-6836; e-mail jmalone@timesdispatch.com

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