

Does Life Coaching Really Work?

It's one of the fastest-growing industries with an estimated 100,000 Britons turning to life coaches. But do they really deliver life-changing advice or do these counsellors create more problems than they solve?

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With her 30th birthday fast approaching, Claire Banks just couldn't help feeling that something was missing; surely there was more to life than this.

Yes she had a good job, a well-off boyfriend and enjoyed the sort of lifestyle her parents had only dreamed of, but like an itch she couldn't scratch she was beset with nagging doubts. Looking back, she now knows she would have been better off confiding in her family and friends. But in a therapy-obsessed society where everyday problems are dressed up as medical conditions, Claire ended convincing herself that she needed professional help.

And like Cherie Blair, Hilary Clinton, Madonna, Vanessa Feltz and an estimated 100,000 Britons, she turned to a life coach. It is a decision she regrets. "to say I am disappointed with the return on my £600 investment for a dozen sessions with a life coach is an understatement," says Claire, a customer care manager for a major healthcare company. "I expected to come away from the first sessions with a list of goals and positive steps I could follow. "The reality was that the life coach spent most of the time trying to psychoanalyse my childhood and look for baggage that could have caused me to lose my focus in my life. The truth was I had a happy upbringing and have an amazing family, so she was wasting her time and mine. She also dwelt on what I'd done wrong to trigger the problems I was encountering so by the end of the experience, far from being uplifted and full of hope, I was blaming myself."

Claire's experience is not unique. In the past four years, the industry in Britain has exploded, from 500 life coaches to more than 4,000. There are thousands more in 'training' (for some, this can be no more than a weekend course), eager to get their hands on a slice of a business that pays between £30 and £600 per hour for advice that is routinely handed out over the phone. Life coaches are everywhere – on TV, filling the bookstores and even in Yellow Pages, where advert after advert promises to 'turn your goals and ambitions into reality', to fast track your performance and achieve your potential' and to teach you to 'live the life you wanted'.

As worrying as the lack of regulation is the fact that the growth in the number of life coaches reflects a perceived need within society. Demand is coming from those – particularly women – aged between 25 and 35 in white-collar jobs. Like Claire, these are the people who appear to have it all yet for some reason are convinced their problems are so great they must pay for help. But there is growing belief that they are victims of a con and that life coaches (the phrase was coined by an American financial adviser-turned-therapist) and the counselling industry as a whole are generating business for themselves by promoting a sense of insecurity and an inability to cope.

Hard to believe, but in Britain there are more than 250,000 people whose job involves counselling – more than the number employed in the Armed Forces. It's no wonder that the country is so-called 'self-esteem' industry is said to be worth £15 billion. Over the past two years, student life coach numbers have trebled to 2,000 at the Somerset-based Life Coaching Institute, and the UK College of Life Coaching predicts numbers will double by the end of 2006. "British society has become increasingly influenced by the values of therapeutic culture, which encourages us to believe we do not have the emotional resources to handle problems without professional guidance," says Frank Furedi, Professor of Sociology at Kent University. "Almost every aspect of life has been professionalised, and there is pressure on us to resist solving our own problems or turning to friends or relatives for help. The reason life coaches are popular is that they promise to give you a future-orientated analysis which, at first sight, is very appealing. A lot of people are insecure about what lies ahead and become quite vulnerable when someone offers to direct them along a path that will offer positive outcomes."

When Claire, who lives in Hove, West Sussex, booked an appointment with a life coach recommended by a friend, that is exactly what she was looking for. Looking back, she appreciates that her problems were hardly exceptional. She was unhappy at work and in her relationship with her IT consultant boyfriend and had run up debts by spending too much on expensive foreign holidays. "All the problems seemed to come at once and I did not know what to tackle first," she says. "So I decided it would be worth investing in the services of a third party to give me impartial advice. It felt less dramatic and intimidating to see a life coach rather than a psychologist or suggesting that my partner and I go for couples' counselling."

The sessions with the life coach left her feeling low. Her mood lifted only after she bumped into a relative at a family get-together. They chatted for an hour and he suggested simple techniques to help her approach life more positively. "It was just a question of being honest with myself about what I wanted from life," she says. "I moved on from my relationship, found a lovely flat and started getting my life back. As my self-confidence increased, I started pushing for more responsibility at work and won a great promotion. The life coach actually set me back a year."

According to Professor Furedi, people need to understand that coaches are not magicians, "The best case scenario is that you might get a few snippets of common sense but you could equally well get them from a local shopkeeper," he says. "But the worst case is that a life coach could further complicate your life and add to your feelings of dissatisfaction. Many of these people have failed in their own lives and are trying to regain their destiny by helping others. They can be the worst people to turn to".

Julie Brown, 31, a personal assistant in a bank, lives in Leeds with fiancé Steven Richards, a management consultant. The life coach she saw for two months failed to recognise she was suffering from severe depression. "During 2003, I suffered a number of blows to my self-confidence," says Julie. "I faced redundancy twice and my relationship got to breaking point because I was so low. I couldn't imagine a future for myself, let alone as a couple. "The life coach seemed genuinely interested in the doom and gloom of my personal circumstances. We focused on my rock-bottom self-confidence and how problems that Steven had at his work were draining me, too. But this made me resent him and instead of beginning to feel better, it led to friction in our relationship. I loved him but the life coach assured me I could live without him."

Julie was on the verge of walking out on Steven when a friend suggested she was showing signs of depression. “I couldn’t sleep, I had dark circles under my eyes, my attention span was non-existent, my skin was wretched, I cried constantly, and I’d lost more than a stone.” Julie ended the life coaching and went to her GP, who diagnosed clinical depression. “I was mortified that I’d not spotted the signs – and that the life coach had glossed over them and in many respects made me feel worse,” she says. Julie was out on anti-depressants, and had regular sessions with a qualified counsellor. Eighteen months on, she feels normal again. She and Steven are to marry, they’ve bought a house and Julie has been promoted. “I trod a dark and dismal road to get here and I feel angry that life coach didn’t spot the signs of depression when they were so obvious. I’d have been better off using the £480 I spent on eight sessions of life coaching on a holiday,” she says.

Although life coaching is unregulated, there is now an umbrella organisation, the Association for Coaching, which aims to raise standards. “It is inevitable that some people will be unhappy with the coaching process – nothing can be 100 per cent foolproof,” says spokeswoman Gladeana McMahon. “Family and friends cannot do what a coach does – they cannot pass on skills they do not have. They may not tell the person the truth or they could have a very dictatorial style. Coaching takes a person from a zero position to a plus position; it is about personal development. If a client is unhappy and the coach they use is part of the Association for Coaching, they can make a formal complaint and we will investigate and sanction if appropriate.”

But there are still plenty of life coach disciples risking bad advice. Since divorcing two years ago, Hannah Dodds, a 36-year-old writer from London, has felt dissatisfied with her lot. “I seemed unable to feel content with anything, from work to friendships. I also couldn’t stop spending – on clothes, my home and going out. It was as though I felt I could buy the happiness I craved.” Within minutes of handing over £90 for a 45-minute session with a life coach, Hannah had doubts. “The coach immediately told me I’d need one or two sessions a week for three months – at a cost of more than £1,000,” she says. “I started by explaining my circumstances, focusing on my divorce, but he dismissed this and decided to concentrate on my inability to say “No”. He asked me to fold my arms as I normally would. After noting my right arm was crossed over my left, he told me to fold them the opposite way round and asked how I felt. When I replied it felt unnatural, his response was: “Change always does.” The rest of the advice boiled down to taking a deep breath before answering the phone and counting to ten before I spent any money. I was expecting the life coach to be sensitive and interested in me, but the reality was that it felt desperately impersonal. I should have talked to a friend or relative – someone who actually cares about me.” Hannah did at least follow one piece of her coach’s advice; counting to ten and deciding not to waste money on further sessions.

Professor Furedi believes that if others follow her lead, the benefits would not only be financial. “We have to understand that we learn from our mistakes. That is what makes us strong – and gives us the control we crave over our lives.”