

Guide to life

*Can't get no satisfaction? Plenty of people are paying a life coach to help sort out their lives.
ANN NEWBERRY reports.*



CHRIS SKELTON

Hinurewa te Hau says life coaching helped her overcome her marriage break-up and subsequent relocation to Auckland.

PARNELL BUSINESSWOMAN Hinurewa te Hau concedes she'd hit rock bottom before going to a life coach. Her world was in turmoil following the break-up of her 16-year marriage. She gave up a good job in Wellington and moved back to Auckland to make access to her 10-year-old daughter easier.

"I was very vulnerable," she says, reflecting on a miserable 2004. "I came back to Auckland going through all these issues and needed to sort things out. Sometimes you can't do things by yourself."

A friend recommended she try a hot trend in the personal development field – life coaching. Her three-month stint of several hours once a week with a coach was very intense, "but change was happening to my life and I needed to address what my values and principles were."

"I needed to get some sense of clarity, some sense of direction," she says. "I needed to get some self-confidence back, to convince myself I was still a good person. And that's what I got!"

Though she may have been a recent convert to life coaching, that's not the case for fellow Aucklander and company owner Jim Walker, who has been a devotee for two decades.

"In the early 80s I was a tradesman printer who had this desperate urge to get into management. I needed to work on and invest in myself, and I think that's what I got out of

going to a life coach. Back then, I wrote out a dream list of about four pages of things I wanted to achieve in my life. After 15 years I revisited that list and I'd achieved about 80 per cent."

Walker and te Hau, with an increasing number of New Zealanders, are hooked on life coaching, a trend – some call it a fad – which originated in the United States about 15 years ago. Originally it was a motivational tool for the corporate world. Now it encompasses everyday people and every aspect of their lives. Much like personal trainers who help clients work on their body, life coaches claim to "guide" individuals in setting goals and tweaking all aspects of their lives – from changing careers to improving relationships. Basically, to get the most satisfaction out of their days.

"People are more open now to saying 'I'm working with a coach and I'm getting a benefit'," says Douglas Lang, New Zealand director of the International Coach Federation Australasia. His organisation is a voluntary body with about 100 members here and 7500 worldwide in almost 30 countries.

He suggests shockwaves from the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center caused many people – and not just Americans – to reassess their lives. "That suddenly brought home to people: 'What is this all about? What am I here for?'" says Lang. "Maybe a sense that any moment something could happen so I want to get as much as I pos-

sibly can out of my life." In the past, people had a large circle of friends, family members, work colleagues or even church figures they could go to for help and advice. But that's not the case now.

"I guess we are becoming a more individualistic society, where the family unit is breaking down," says Lang. "There's not the same kind of support networks that maybe people had in the past. Having access to somebody else in the form of a coach can provide that opportunity for people to work through some things which they may well have done in the past in a different kind of environment."

Life coaching "isn't rocket science", laughs life coach Anita Hollerer-Squire whose gentle Austrian accent reverberates around her villa in Kingsland, Auckland. "Life coaching is really simple," she explains. "It's just looking at where you are now in your life, where you want to be and how to get there."

Some of her clients "are stuck", she suggests. The majority come, initially, because of their careers. "They have slithered into something they don't want to be in but they don't know what they want to do." Others may be unhappy that they have no partner, or they're overweight, or have no work life/home life balance.

Life coaches usually begin by asking the client specific questions, having them fill in forms about their values and



CHRIS SHELTON

Life coach Anita Hollerer-Squire says the process is not a quick fix. Clients often have many issues to overcome.

goals. Later, the client is assigned tasks towards achieving it. There is no quick fix, Hollerer-Squire cautions. "If somebody expects to come in here and talk to me once or twice then have a great life, no, it's not going to happen," she says. The client has to do the work, overcoming common issues such as procrastination, low self-esteem and fear of failure. Many of her clients are in their 30s and 40s, facing mid-life crises. "That's old enough to start thinking 'where do I go from here but still have time to make it happen?'" Her oldest customer was 69. "It's nice that older people still look forward, 'OK, what can I do to improve my future?'" Hollerer-Squire may prefer to deal with clients on a face-to-face basis, but Jacqui Thomas, of Auckland life coaching company Live Your Dreams, does most of her

work over the phone (as do most American practitioners). "It's very focused," she explains. She mainly works with women. At the moment she is busy organising an April 16-17 workshop, called Go Girl Go! (which also happens to be the title of her self-help book), aimed at women in business or those contemplating setting one up. Thomas believes life coaching is increasingly popular because clients are confused by the vast array of choices confronting them. "People are busier. We don't have as much time for each other. A lot of people come to a coach because they want to talk things through with somebody and they don't have an objective person to use as a sounding board." It's a theme echoed by Christchurch's Michael Mayell. The founder of Cookie Time, Mayall is about to celebrate

the first anniversary of his internet company www.aristotle.co.nz. Aristotle offers a \$30-a-month service where clients are phoned up mostly daily with pre-recorded motivational ideas to help them stick to their goals. "Basically this is about helping yourself. It's about taking responsibility for your life," he says.

For the past four years, Mayell has been a client of an Oregon life coach, speaking to her on the phone for an hour each week. "It's really convenient," says the busy businessman. "Balancing the demands of work, partners, children and self is a growing challenge. Having someone to help identify what's important to us and to support us in the change process is a great thing."

Another reason for life coaching's popularity may be that it has gained considerable credibility. American talk show queen Oprah Winfrey helped popularise the movement when her TV shows moved away from tabloid topics and focused on self-improvement. "In the past pretty much anyone could call themselves a life coach," says Thomas. "But I think the market is getting a bit more savvy and people expect training and qualifications. Because of that, the quality is getting better."

The lack of standards is a concern, admits Lang. Some ICF members and clinical psychologists fear shonky practitioners could wreak havoc on vulnerable clients.



DR STUART CARR

Dr Stuart Carr, associate professor and co-ordinator of the industrial and organisational psychology programme at Massey University's Albany campus says: "[Life coaching] is a bit of a growth industry but I suspect there'll be some mishaps out there. There's the expectation of a quick fix that may be more difficult to deliver in the real world. It may backfire in some way."

Psychologists would, he says, be sceptical about whether coaching programmes could work until they'd seen evidence. "I wouldn't personally go to one," he adds, "because I think if it's that individualistic you could pick up a lot of it yourself."

He believes some people could fall through the cracks because there isn't legislation in place to protect them – especially if an unscrupulous life coach hadn't signed up to a governing body with its own code of ethics. "Whenever you're dealing with people's lives there is a moral onus to have some kind of quality control mechanism," he says.

However, he does think the practice of coaches setting goals for their clients can work.

"Goal setting of any kind can change behaviour. If you set concrete goals that are realistic and attainable, they can have an impact."

Caught in bursts of enthusiasm, Jim Walker has frequently tried paying for life coaching and other personal growth programmes for his employees.

"Some of my staff resent it, even the suggestion," he says. "And that's the key – you've got to want to motivate yourself, you've got to want to better yourself. If you can do that," he argues, "then the world is your oyster."

Hinurewa Te Hau certainly has no complaints and feels she received value for money. In fact, she and two other gal pals have plans to do another stint with a life coach, this time with the focus on their careers.

"The beauty of coaching," says Thomas, "is you're working with positive, well people who are moving forward. They're there because they want to be there. They want to make changes and they're prepared to do the work to make them happen. It's a very positive place to be."

"You have to feel comfortable being open and honest with this individual, and that there's a degree of connection."

DOUGLAS LANG, OF INTERNATIONAL COACH FEDERATION NZ

- Prior to signing up with a life coach, you should consider the following:
- Speak to several life coaches before making a final decision about who you will hire.
 - Check what training they have had. Check if they are an accredited coach or are taking steps to becoming accredited.
 - Get a sense of their experience, either as a coach or just life and business experience.
 - Ask if you can speak to previous clients, to get a sense of how they worked with them.