

Turning Tables: When a Life Coach Needs a Life Coach



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This article examines the value of a professional life coach, specifically during very personal turmoil. Significant life challenges can affect a person's ability to function in his/her professional role. A life coach is different from a therapist, because a life coach focuses on moving forward while navigating transitions, choices, and growth. Similar to a nurse needing the care of another nurse, my significant personal circumstances as a life coach required the help and ongoing support of another life coach. My experience on the client side of the professional dynamic gave me a deeper and more appreciative perspective of the value and benefits of the role.

Life coaches work with their clients to help them achieve goals, overcome obstacles, and make changes or shifts in their lives. The coach works with the client, as a partner knowing that the client has the answers to create the changes they seek. It is hard to estimate how many life coaches practice worldwide. But according to a 2016 study by the International Coach Federation (ICF), which is one of the industry's most recognized accreditation organizations, there are approximately 53,300 coach practitioners worldwide with an estimated 2015 global revenue of \$2.356 billion USD from coaching.¹

Unlike therapists, life coaches do *not* counsel or analyze the past. Coaching does not involve traditional cognitive therapy but instead uses the client's inherent desire to support change. Life coaches assist clients in moving on from the past, increase self-confidence/self-esteem to foster positive growth, renewed hope, and a clearer vision for the future. Coaches offer a safe, nurturing, and unassuming environment where clients can discover a life pathway that *they* create.

GETTING STARTED AS A LIFE COACH

I was drawn to life coaching after becoming board certified as a nurse coach through The American Holistic Nurses Credentialing Corporation. After years of researching resiliency and self-care, I found that my clients were discussing more about being "stuck" and figuring out "how" they wanted their lives to be. Their reason for hiring me may have initially been to change their lifestyle and heal after illness or manage their chronic disease, but it most often evolved into hearing questions such as "Where do I go from here?" or "How do I create the life I really want after everything I've gone through?"

It was fascinating that whereas physical ailments such as reduction of hypertension, diabetes management, mitigation of cardiovascular risk/events, cancer recovery, obesity, irritable bowel syndrome, etc. were some of the reasons they were seeking help, the underlying root cause of illness was due to adrenal burnout and triggering the inflammatory response from emotional and mental exhaustion. I heard comments related to unhappiness, loneliness, despair, and regret. I listened to very successful people talk about current and past traumatic events, even childhood trauma.

In the New York Times bestseller, *The Body Keeps the Score*,² author Bessel Van Der Kolk, MD, presents overwhelming research regarding the manifestation of trauma of various kinds, chronic negative stress and suffering to the diagnosis of many physical diseases. Chronic and unmitigated assault to our central nervous system from *any* source will most likely produce adverse physical effects in a multitude of ways. After being convinced that people needed real help with regaining themselves: their passion, their purpose, their hope for

KEY POINTS

- **The role of a life coach is different from a therapist, and each offers benefits to be helpful alone or conjointly.**
- **Significant personal events can adversely affect the ability of a nurse leader to function at work.**
- **Asking for help when recovering from traumatic life events is mandatory for resiliency, recovery and to healing.**

a holistically healthy future, I started focusing on using my skills as a life coach.

It is an incredible privilege and honor to have the opportunity to support a client in an intimate relationship of digging deep to determine and manifest their life desires. Often, their self-confidence needs shoring up as most have experienced a significant life event that triggered the desire for a change. Sometimes the event was self-imposed, but often it was not. Life coaching requires skill that involves deep, nonjudgmental listening, walking side by side, never “pulling” in front of them, nor “pushing” from behind. We partner until *they* feel they have reached their goal. It involves being able to truly “hold space” for their profound reflection, transformation, and feeling prepared to move forward to execute. Some clients are willing to do the hard, often painful work, and some decide it’s too much. Timing is everything and getting clear about intention requires courage and getting comfortable with being uncomfortable for a while.

MY JOURNEY

In June of 2017, my boyfriend and I decided to follow our lifelong dream of moving to a tropical island. The thought of daily ocean swims, teaching yoga on the beach, and star gazing at night were intoxicating. Visions of picking my lunch off a tree swirled in my head. What a healthy lifestyle we would have! He had sold his large home before meeting me. We were living in Denver, Colorado, where it’s a seller’s market, so selling my large house, including *all* the contents (even the toilet paper!) happened in the first 3 hours it was listed. Life was good!

I loved my home, and had lovingly decorated it beautifully, in a style that reflected a “Colorado spa” feel. The mountain view was spectacular, and the backyard was an oasis complete with a waterfall, pond, and hot tub for relaxing on snowy days after skiing or hot sweaty bike rides in the summer. But it was big, too big for my 2 elderly fur babies and me. And the lure of following a dream together, building a new life on an island was exciting, romantic, and magical. Although I was both terrified and uncertain of what my new life would look like, I was deeply committed to my sweetheart, and we were madly in love.

So, as he grabbed my hand and shouted, “Here’s to our new life adventure!” we ran down a dock and jumped in the ocean. The feeling was exhilarating, and I was confident in my decision. My trust and belief in our relationship, and him ran deep. We were manifesting our dreams! It’s a sobering sight to see your entire life sitting in a garage, ready to be picked up, palletized, placed on a ship, and moved to an island in the middle of the Caribbean. My life had diminished down to 30 boxes, 2 bikes and 2 sweet fur babies. Gone was the beautiful furniture, rugs, artwork, winter clothes, dinnerware...absolutely

everything...dismantled and hauled out by both friends and strangers.

Too much thought could easily result in paralyzing fear, yet my unwavering belief and desire for a new life with my forever love in a place we both had dreamed of was my anchor. I cried all the way to the airport on the day we flew away. I already missed my amazing friends, and we hadn’t left yet! I had been blessed with longtime friends and neighbors for the past 19 years who had become my “family,” yet my speaking engagements allowed me the flexibility to visit often, and they all promised to come to visit.

We each had a dog in tow as we boarded the airplane to our new home in St. Croix. We had fallen in love with the property the second we saw it. Villa Croix was a large sprawling resort-inspired house on top of a mountain, overlooking Green Cay and Buck Island, with magnificent views of the Caribbean Sea and its many islands. Upon arriving, we settled into the Caribbean lifestyle as much as possible. As much as I felt homesick, I reminded myself that I was living my dream with my forever love, and we created new traditions.

WHEN EVERYTHING CHANGES

Two months after arriving, the Caribbean was hit with 2 Category 5 hurricanes within a 10-day period. Hurricanes Irma and Maria changed the landscape and the lives of everything in their path. The terror and destruction they created with, in some places, *sustained* winds of 220 mph winds are hard to describe. The entire island was stripped bare of foliage, roofs were blown away like paper mache and scattered randomly. Trees and powerlines snapped and toppled like match sticks. Entire walls “breathed” in and out as we could feel the pressure in our chests. The wind sounded like a freight train rattling the storm shutters violently, especially with Maria, which occurred at night, all night.

The electricity in our house went out on September 6 at 5:45 am and did not return until December 6 at 2:00 pm, when a lineman from Texas pulled up in a truck and attached the power lines to the newly upright poles. It was the *best* Christmas gift we could have asked for, and we celebrated with newly made friends. (We had a large generator, but it had sustained a huge hole in the radiator that rendered it operable only for about an hour at a time if fed with pool water.)

When there is no electricity, there is no water pump, so there was no running water. Roof-collected rainwater that drains into cisterns underground was the only source of water, so we were using a bucket attached to a rope to thread it down a hole in the patio to gather water. For a few days, we were able to rinse off in the pool, but with no pump, the filters cannot work. Therefore, it didn’t take long in the high heat and humidity for the pool to turn green. One word...baby wipes. (Ok, 2 words.)

Cooking was on the grill, and refrigerated perishables were consumed first. Much was thrown away. Blankets were wrapped around refrigerators to keep as cool as possible. The priority each day was feeding pool water to the radiator to use the generator to prevent spoiling of food. (Yes, it was a process!) There was no internet. The only way to communicate was cell service with 1 carrier. Yet, immediately after Maria, an idiot stole the generator for that cell phone tower. Thankfully, a philanthropist donated one shortly after, as the governor of the Virgin Islands would not pay for a security guard.

Corruption runs deep and rampant in the Virgin Islands, and we were already getting a taste of it. There was much more to come as delay after delay became normal with lack of clean-up efforts, nonexistent insurance payments, and very slow assistance from the mainland. Then there was the huge effort of hauling fuel containers for the generator fuel (but only if you had cash and only if you had an account with the marina prior to storms), and this could only be done during the 2 hours allowed away from home per day as imposed with the enforced curfew.

Food? Planning a meal? No way. The grocery stores that still had food and supplies were charging exorbitant prices for what they had. (Think \$9 for a head of old lettuce!) And those 2 hours allowed away from home were spent standing in a line outside the grocery store that circled the building. Armed security guards were posted in and out of the store to prevent looting.

Supply ships were not allowed in for weeks, and the badly damaged airport was closed for a month. We pooled food with our neighbors and ate what we could. I had just been on the mainland and had brought back a case of protein bars and other nonperishable items, which served us well. I was thankful that we both had been avid campers. Amidst this chaos, my sweetheart surprised me with a beautiful diamond ring as a symbol of his commitment. We worked together as a team, and grew closer as we truly weathered the storms together, making new friends and getting to know our neighbors of 6 weeks. As challenging as the times were, there was a sense of community that I cherished. Crime was common, and I tried not to think of all the “what if’s” because it was a scary time for all.

Our lease was only for 1 year, and even though it was early, *this* was the time to start looking at purchasing a house! People were almost giving their damaged homes away, and were literally just walking away. Getting repairs done on an island...well, if you couldn't do it yourself, good luck! (One friend brought her own nails in her suitcase from the mainland as there were no nails available anywhere on island!) We were blessed to have friends who, after the airport opened, came to help us repair the damage to our house so we could continue to stay. After all, where

were we going to go? We committed to stay on the island and rebuild. So, I put my small vacation rental beach condo in South Carolina up for sale. I wanted to use the equity to contribute to a new home on the island.

The hurricanes changed life and people on the island. The landscape was devastated, and so were many residents. Many evacuated to Miami on the “Mercy” ship sent by a cruise company and left with only the clothes they wore. Their homes, jobs, schools, and way of life were literally blown away. I saw examples of incredible human kindness and generosity. I also saw horrendous greediness and ugliness. And somehow, I developed C Diff. Need I say more? You may be wondering why I’m sharing all this detail. I think you’ll understand after you read the next section.

Fast forward 5 months, and everything had changed. My dear one became distant, irritable, and jumpy. He started spending every moment on his phone, getting very angry when I would come close to it. He refused to follow through with commitments he made, saying that I had “misinterpreted” the meaning. (Including the diamond ring on my left hand.) Attempts at discussion were met with denial, dismissal, and refusal.

Then, after one phone call, it finally made sense. He had been having an online relationship with a person he met on an alternative lifestyle website. According to the person I spoke with, they were “in love,” and he was planning on bringing the person to the island so they could get to “know each other better.” The person knew nothing about me. At the same time, I discovered that he had revealed some of this to 2 of our friends. These women had been welcomed into our home, stayed with us during various times when they needed, yet revealed nothing to me.

The betrayal was so devastating that I very seriously contemplated suicide. Only 2 things saved me that night. The thought of my mother’s grief, and the sweet faces of my old dogs. Disbelief, paralyzing fear, overwhelming sadness and anger latched on to what was left of my heart. How in the world could this be happening to me? To us?

In addition to my professional speaking business on self-care and resilience, I had just started a dream job on island and had worked for only 2 days before I sent an e-mail to my boss explaining that I was leaving the island. As I typed the message, I remember feeling like I was living someone else’s life. This just could not be *my* life. I had given up all and everything for my dream life with my forever love in a place that I had worked so very hard to not only survive but thrive. Yet, *this* was the payoff?

With each box I packed (by now, only 8) and hauled each to the post office alone, bits of my soul lay scattered along the way. My ex was away on the mainland with his parents. Each day brought more

despair, fear, and loneliness as I arranged flights to the mainland for myself and my dogs. Where would I go? What would happen to me? The thought of staying in “our” beautiful house on the island never entered my mind, as I couldn’t bear the thought of seeing my ex or answering the inevitable questions from people we knew. Every room, every item, every view, even the familiar potholes in the road triggered a memory of love, laughter, and lost hope.

I could barely breathe, my body badly ached, and I was numb as I drove “our” car to the airport to fly away, leaving the keys under the wheel well. The loving faces of my elderly dogs reflecting in the rearview mirror were the only thing that kept me moving forward. And then...we were gone.

FINDING MY OWN LIFE COACH

I knew I needed help. I understood what happens to the traumatized brain. I knew that my emotional state would greatly affect my body, triggering the inflammatory response and a flooding cascade of harmful hormones with potentially damaging consequences. Recovery would require help from several avenues.

I had committed to 2 very big and important speaking engagements the week after this all occurred. “The show must go on,” and my clients and their conference attendees hired me for my ability to connect and inspire the audience. The challenge of being fully present and focused in our professional lives while our personal lives are rapidly unraveling is...well, beyond difficult. We are human beings, not robots, yet I don’t remember a thing.

I contacted a wonderfully caring therapist I had known in prior years, my beloved nurse practitioner, for some chemical assistance and a reputable life coach. Each played a key role in helping my difficult journey of healing from a life blown apart, grossly disrespected, and ironically, trying to maintain and continuously fill the pipeline of a business based on inspiring others. My therapist helped me talk through the event, piecing together clues, red flags, my ownership of various emotions, and potential patterns of my past. Through cognitive therapy and eventually EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) to release trauma that was “stuck,” I started to feel hopeful.

My wonderful nurse practitioner compassionately cried with me, hugged me, and prescribed appropriate medication that I needed. “Gutting it out” was not an option for me as I was truly suffering, had been eviscerated, and was having great difficulty with daily function. She kept in very close contact with me. My life coach helped guide me toward positive growth, become clear in choices moving forward, and gently unlock my heart’s desires. She partnered with me in

developing a path for my future, regain a sense of belonging, and significantly boosted my pulverized self-esteem and self-worth. She gave me tools that I had used with my own clients to reset, rewire, and recharge. My coach skillfully assisted me in creating a new vision of my life with a renewed purpose by opening my mind to new possibilities and potential opportunities. She held me accountable to my commitment to myself to use the painful experience to help others suffering from traumatic experiences, move forward with renewed hope.

GETTING BACK ON TRACK

Each role played an instrumental part in my continuing recovery and ability to find meaning in my life. As a life coach, I’ve had the privilege of working with some extraordinary people who, at different points in their lives, needed some help in navigating through change or dusting off their lens for the future. I am honored and humbled to be trusted to be their life coach, and am thrilled to see each blossom with renewed passion and purpose.

Although I’m still discovering lessons learned, my personal experience of trauma recovery utilizing a multidisciplinary team of professionals has sharpened my ability to discern my role in the growth of others. My experience has also allowed me to feel a deeper connection with my clients. I find I am better able to “hold the space” to enable their discovery of new possibilities, potential, and direction. My enhanced capacity to offer a neutral, safe, and compassionate relationship has advanced my comprehension of suffering and the need for vulnerability. And that is the gift. Author Jon Storm may have captured my feelings best when he wrote “Sometimes the hardest person to walk away from is the person you’ve always assumed you were.”³

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