

## *AD/HD Coaching: Empowering People to Succeed*

**W**hen therapist David Brown heard about coaching several years ago, his first thought was that it must be a “shallow form of therapy done by people who didn’t make the effort to be formally trained.” It wasn’t until after substantial research and an encounter with a coach at a CHADD Conference that his harsh assessment of coaching was challenged, and he came to the conclusion that coaching does indeed make a valuable contribution to the treatment of AD/HD. He became so convinced, in fact, that he received training and now offers coaching services himself.

Coaching is a concept that has been receiving a growing amount of attention over recent years. A quick search on the Internet turns up listing upon listing of names and organizations that offer per-sonal, professional, and AD/HD coaching services. But in spite of its increasing popularity, there remains a great deal of ambiguity surrounding this emerging field. I talked to six coaches, all of whom work with clients who have AD/HD, to shed some light on the topic.

### **What is coaching?**

“Unlike therapy, coaching focuses on functional issues,” explains veteran coach Sue Sussman, considered a pioneer in the specialty of AD/HD coaching. “An individual who could benefit from coaching is one who has deficiencies in such areas as time management and organization.” She says a major part of a coach’s job is to help the client develop skills in these areas and incorporate structures that will improve the overall quality of their lives.

A coach’s job is not to help a client through emotional issues, but rather to help the client attain goals she has set for herself, but has difficulty working towards because of problems with motivation, staying on task, and distractibility. As Brown puts it, “Coaching is not designed to figure out the ‘whys’ of a person’s behavior, but instead to produce the ‘whats.’”

According to Brown, who has been a licensed therapist for fourteen years and a coach for a little over a year, “Coaches help their clients create an individualized structure and a best-fit environment that compensates externally for what is weak internally.” He says that coaching – through a process that relies on structure, skills, strategies, and support – creates compensatory strategies that cue clients to behave the way they want to behave and motivate them to be persistent in a task. “Unlike a consultant, who makes recommendations and then leaves you to do what you will with the recommendations, the coach stays with you throughout the process, guiding, collaborating, and supporting,” explains Brown.

In a coach-client relationship, the client is responsible for doing the work; the coach's job is simply to support the client in her efforts. "The unique thing about coaching – and the reason I was drawn to it – is that it empowers people to take responsibility for themselves and make decisions on their own," says Herbert Romero, whose organization, PROJECT TOOLS, (TOOLS stands for Treasures Out of LA Streets) works with at risk youth and to combat domestic violence and abuse in several communities in Los Angeles. "I found that coaching complimented my efforts to counsel people. And more than that, it has provided me with an effective tool for empowering families to become self-sufficient."

Sandy Maynard, who specializes in helping individuals with AD/HD maintain motivation around their goals, says sometimes this empowerment can be just as simple as patting a client on the back and saying "Job well done."

"One of my main objectives as a coach is to serve as a source of support and accountability," she says. "I tell my clients I'm not a paid nag; I just nudge a lot."

### **How does coaching work?**

There is no formula for coaching, though there is a standard coaching model that suggests that coaches meet face to face with their clients for thirty minutes each week for three out of every four weeks. Most of the coaches interviewed for this article stressed their willingness to be flexible based on their clients' needs.

Sussman, for instance, meets with some clients once a week for an hour and talks to others once a day. Brown coaches primarily via phone, since most of his clients are located outside his local area. And Linda Anderson, who has been coaching for seven years, typically communicates with clients via e-mail, in addition to thirty-minute weekly meetings. The bottom line: in order to be effective, coaching must be customized to best serve each individual's specific – and often different – needs.

Typically, coaching clients either fill out an extensive questionnaire or participate in an initial interview that uncovers personality traits, lifestyle issues, and their general background. This information gathering process not only helps the coach obtain a picture of what issues the client needs to work on, but also helps the client take an inventory of himself and his goals, says Brown. Following the initial communication, the coach and client develop a meeting schedule.

Brown emphasizes the importance of acceptance in his first several meetings with new clients. "My philosophy is, if you don't have acceptance of what you have, it's very hard to account for it. A client can have all the tools and knowledge in the world about AD/HD, but not have the first clue about how to deal with the disorder unless they first understand and accept it. Once they do, they can work miracles with it," contends Brown, who has AD/HD himself.

Helping her clients develop an effective organizing system is Anderson's initial priority. "The first thing I tell my clients is they can't walk around with all the thoughts in their head or they'll forget them. The key is writing down these thoughts and keeping track of them – whether they prefer electronic things, like computerized organizers, or are more comfortable with a paper notebook." She says the most important step in helping clients get organized is identifying what has worked for them in the past. "The answers to organization come from what clients have had success with. We do not have to start from scratch."

Coaching is very much a collaborative process where the client is viewed as the expert, according to Brown. "As a coach, my job is to facilitate goals and serve as a catalyst for accomplishing those goals. I don't have to be an expert in the client's profession or even his particular difficulties. Instead, I have to be an expert in communication, goal setting, organizational skills, and in how people do what they do," says Brown.

"I have a very eyeball to eyeball relationship with my clients," says Eric Kohner, who has been coaching for over a decade. "I'm not standing above telling them what to do. We're in the trenches together."

### **How can coaching benefit people with AD/HD?**

"Coaching is a good fit for a lot of difficulties that people with AD/HD have," says Sussman.

"Typically, individuals with AD/HD have trouble being self-directed because of memory problems, impulsivity, or distractibility, so having some kind of outside environmental direction is good."

Maynard adds, "Time and again, I see individuals of all ages with AD/HD who are very creative and have eclectic interests. The problem is, they get distracted and stop working towards their goal. That's where the help of a coach can be beneficial."

Anderson points out that individuals with AD/HD are not typically good self-observers and often have difficulty creating a plan for their lives because they tend to get overwhelmed by all the things they have to do, find it difficult breaking down the big picture, and have trouble picking the tools that help them sort through it all. "I help my clients develop a map, focus on the big picture, and choose tools that will help them accomplish their goals," she explains.

Kohner, who uses a coach to help with his own AD/HD, emphasizes understanding in his sessions with clients. "Most people with AD/HD feel misunderstood. Good coaches understand the disorder and can simply serve as a source of support." However, while Kohner acknowledges that AD/HD often creates challenges that deter goal accomplishment, he stresses that it should not be used as an excuse. "Whether a person has AD/HD or not, he has to be accountable for what he says he is going to do. I

can appreciate the difficulties that AD/HD has presented to my clients – especially considering I have the disorder myself – and I praise them for having the courage to go out into the world and do what they have to do. At the same time, I also hold them accountable for what they say they’re going to do.”

### **Is coaching only for adults?**

Some, but certainly not all, coaches can be hired by parents to work with adolescents. Maynard, who does work with teens, says that coaching can aid the family dynamic. “Parents who hire me to coach their kids love it because they don’t have to be a nag, and the kids love it because their parents aren’t nagging them. It alleviates a lot of stress for the whole family.”

Maynard admits that she’s often met with resistance from teens at first, but she says that if she can establish a good rapport, coaching usually works well. “The teens I have coached gain a better sense of independence. They are organizing their lives and planning for their futures with the help of an adult other than their parents. That’s a big accomplishment for many teens.”

### **What kind of training do coaches receive?**

Presently, there is no specific training or certification required for coaches working with people with AD/HD, though there are a number of general coaching programs available. The International Coaching Federation (ICF), for instance, offers a certification program for personal and professional coaches. In addition, a handful of individuals throughout the country offer training for individuals interested in coaching people with AD/HD. Most of the coaches interviewed for this article participated in some form of training. Several were certified in general coaching or related fields.

Sussman, who has her own coach training company called Americoach, believes that AD/HD coaching will probably be added to the ICF’s certification program within the next few years. The growing popularity of the field and demands from the public, the AD/HD community, and professional AD/HD coaches to have standards put into place, makes it highly likely, she says.

### **How does coaching work with therapy?**

“Coaching is very synergistic with therapy,” says Maynard, who aligns herself with professionals in the mental health arena. “If a potential crisis situation arises (such as noticing a client is severely depressed or outwardly angry), I immediately call upon my colleagues in the mental health field for assistance.”

Brown suggests receiving therapy before consulting a coach is sometimes beneficial. “In order to get the most out of coaching, a client has to be ready, willing, and able to proceed. What I mean by that is she has to have some level of clarity of what hasn’t

worked for her in the past and where she wants to go in the future. Therapy can be a good first step.”

One of the coach’s responsibilities is determining if a client is a good candidate for coaching. Kohner looks for “red flags” during his first several meetings with a client that may indicate a need for help from a mental health provider. “It’s not that unusual for a client to cry or be upset during our first meeting, but if he is still crying by our third, I tell him he may not be ready for coaching and that he should consider seeking the help of a therapist.”

Sussman says that a coach can be anywhere from the first professional a client has had contact with to the last in a long line, so, occasionally, a client will blur boundaries between coaching and therapy. “If that happens, and a client begins to talk about the relationship with his mother, for instance, I will remind him that that is not an issue I can address, but that I can provide him a list of various types of professionals who can help him in that area.” She says a team meeting – including herself, her client, and the client’s therapist or psychologist – is sometimes helpful.

A colleague of mine is a baseball coach. He likes to say that, “If I leave every game knowing that I did everything possible to put our players in the best position to win, then I did my job.” Not a bad way to describe the field of AD/HD coaching – their clients have the talent; coaches help them position themselves to succeed.

**Lisa Horan** is a freelance writer and the managing editor of ATTENTION! magazine.

Attention!® Magazine Volume 6, Number 1, Page 12