



ST ILLUSTRATION: ADAM LEE

Life coaches for life lessons?

More people are turning to life coaches for advice in their careers, studies and relationships



When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping – for a life coach.

Once, Singaporeans hitting a rough patch or needing advice about their career and relationships might have talked to their family and friends, or taken the formal step of seeing a psychologist.

But these days, more are paying big bucks to pour out their troubles to life coaches, whose services first became popular in the United States for their pragmatic approach to sorting out all kinds of issues.

These “coaches” tackle every possible problem, even acting as a sounding board to help their clients find direction in life.

For Madam S. Tan, who is in her 40s, having six two-hour sessions in 2009 with Mr Barney Wee, who runs Mind Transformations, helped her work out health and relationship issues. She had previously tried counselling but felt there was no “trust or chemistry”.

The human resource executive, who paid \$200 an hour for those sessions, says: “Coaching helped me confront issues with my belief and value systems which I wasn’t aware of.”

The mother of two added that it was wanting to find a “breakthrough to move forward in life” that prompted her to see Mr Wee. “He didn’t allow me to rattle on about my sob stories. Instead, he made me confront my issues and deal with them.”

Life coaches here say they are seeing more people. One, Mr Jensen Siaw, who has been in the life-coaching business for six years with his company, Jensen Siaw Life Coaching, said that when he first started, he had one call a month for meet-up sessions, but he now receives 10 to 15 calls a month for one-on-one coaching.

“There’s growing awareness, espe-

cially among corporate professionals, who take part in company-sponsored team-building or personal-growth workshops,” says the 33-year-old, who previously worked in sales and marketing.

Other life coaches LifeStyle spoke to, including Mr Wee and Ms Wendy Chua, director of eight-year-old Wand Inspiration, have also seen increased interest.

When Ms Chua started her business in 2003, she was getting just three calls a year. Today, the “calls of interest have increased by tenfold for the same period”.

The International Coach Federation Singapore, which is an affiliate of the main body in the US, has about 250 registered life coaches here.

Coaches say the number of sessions depends on what the client feels he needs to achieve his aim.

Coaching fees are not cheap and range from \$150 for an hour with a newly set-up coach to as much as \$1,000 for more established ones. The fees are despite the fact that there is no official certification required in Singapore to be a coach.

While it is mostly professionals above 30 who engage life coaches, increasingly, students, some as young as 11, seek help for problems that could range from making a career decision to overcoming academic problems in school.

A business management student, who wants to be known only as Mr Tan, was signed up for three life coaching sessions with Wand Inspiration by his mother.

The 23-year-old, who went for sessions last month, says: “She thought I didn’t have a clue about my career path, so I was pressured into going. I was open to the idea but at the same time apprehensive about how useful it would be.”

He says the one-hour sessions did, in fact, help him understand himself better in order to choose a career.

He prefers to remain anonymous due to a view that life coaching is “like marriage counselling – the negative perception is one of not being able to solve your own problems and having to rely on others to do so”.

Ms Chua of Wand Inspiration, which has a team of six, says: “We walk the journey with the person in a mentor-client relationship. We help them set goals and work towards them.”

The 41-year-old, who was previously a psychologist at Raffles Institution, adds: “We give them human empathy that a self-help book can’t. And people want a neutral, objective person with no interest at stake to guide them.”

And Mr Wee, who has been in the business since 1997, emphasises life coaching is not therapy or counselling.

“These are not people with extreme behavioural or psychological problems, where they are crying out for help. Those who come for life coaching want to get the best out of their lives and re-engineer their way of thinking to do that,” he says.

Coaches use personality tests, goal-setting agendas and even role-playing to help clients solve problems.

Life coaching is also useful for those who want help but without the stigma of being thought of as being mentally ill.

Mr Siaw says: “Sometimes, they want trained and qualified help without having a record of seeing a therapist or counsellor.”

Ms L. Lim, 40, paid about \$300 for a three-hour session 2½ years ago with Mr Wee to work out her grief over her mother’s death.

The mother of a three-year-old boy

says: “It was money well spent for me because I could move forward rather than dwell on unhappy feelings.”

Still, Singapore Management University’s assistant professor of psychology William Tov warns: “The appeal of life coaches may be their charisma and their ability to motivate and inspire. That is a skill that is not necessarily taught in counselling programmes.”

“There’s nothing wrong with seeking inspiration and motivation to improve oneself, but we need to be mindful of people’s credentials.”

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MS WENDY CHUA, director of eight-year-old coaching set-up Wand Inspiration