

## Working With a Wellness Coach

By Andrea Berninger Thomas

**Like many people, Cary Gray Kelly** knew she would enjoy better health if she added more movement to her days and achieved a smaller number on the scale. Yet when she was ready to tackle her weight-management goal, Kelly didn't simply embark on an "eat-less, exercise-more" regimen. ■ Instead, a year ago the Washington, D.C.–area resident, who gets bored with routine, began a journey of activity and nutrition

that led her from a Wii Fit Balance Board to the top of bell towers in Italy, revolutionizing her attitude along the way.

**KELLY'S FIRST STEP: GETTING A COACH.** No, she wasn't bribing herself with a stylish handbag or paying a high-strung guy to pace and scream into a bullhorn while she worked out. Instead, Kelly sought guidance from a certified wellness coach.

These professionals, who also may be called health coaches, offer support, accountability and individualized goal-setting assistance to clients who want to address one or more aspects of wellness—such as stress management, physical fitness, smoking cessation, nutrition, relationships, weight management and life balance—and, ultimately, improve their long-term well-being.

Wellness coaching is an emerging and increasingly popular outgrowth of the personal-training profession; science-based wellness disciplines, including mind/body and positive psychology; and the executive-coaching and life-coaching movements that have been growing over the last 20 years and emphasize personal and professional goals.

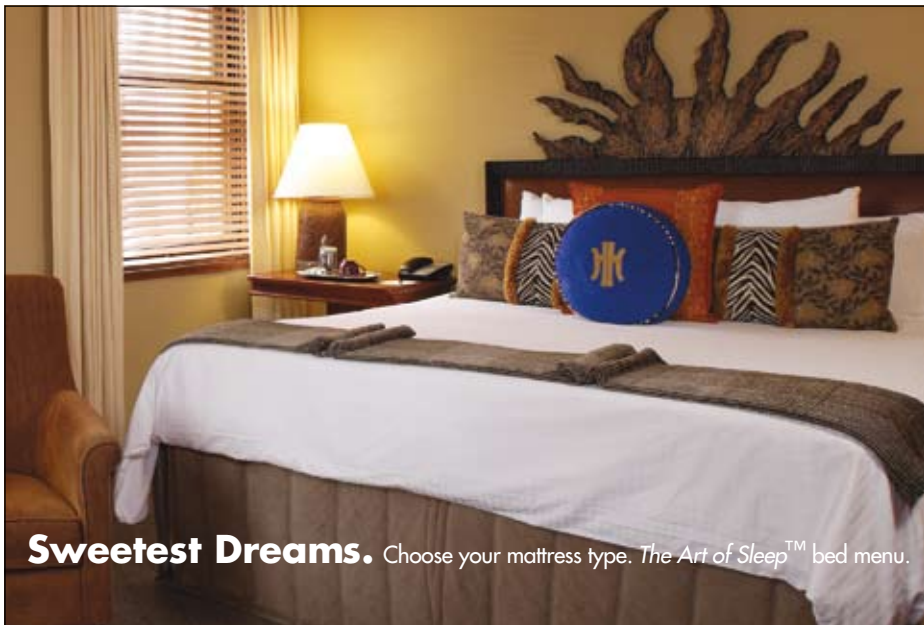
Personal trainers specialize in assessing a client's current fitness level through exercise testing. Using these results, the trainer designs and teaches exercises appropriate to the client's abilities and fitness goals. A wellness coach might incorporate some of these services, particularly if the coach is also a personal trainer. But wellness coaching focuses on clients' internal motivations and personal roadblocks related to their goals.

Coaches use tools such as active listening, nonverbal-communication skills and questioning techniques. This may sound similar to a session on a psychotherapist's couch, but coaching differs from counseling because it applies a client's motivations to present and future goals and solutions, rather than concentrating on past issues.

Wellness coaches operate from the perspective that clients have the wisdom and capacity to succeed at changing their habits and sustaining new behaviors. "Coaches help their clients clarify their thoughts and encourage them to come up with their own solutions," says Dorothy Sager, a Seattle-based certified wellness coach and founder of the company Synergy Wellness Coach. "Wellness coaches don't fix—they guide."

Because the process allows clients to define success on their own terms, and because the wellness coach's role is that of a supportive "cheerleader," clients typically have positive experiences.

They also frequently achieve what they set out to do, says Sager. "Interestingly, clients I have worked with have all reached the goals we set up."



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Defining a precise overall goal and smaller intermediate goals is a hallmark of wellness coaching and essential to success, Sager says, because it provides a way to measure progress.

**KELLY'S INITIAL GOAL-SETTING** task with her coach, Sarah Robertson Sutton of the Herndon, Virginia-based coaching firm Truce, was to create a clear picture of her desired outcome. This new Kelly would have a joyful attitude toward daily-nutrition and physical-activity practices designed to help her thrive long term with 20 fewer pounds.

With that "after" picture serving as inspiration, Kelly and her coach focused on the day-to-day actions Kelly would take to become her visualized ideal, such as parking farther from the store or walking instead of riding in a cart when golfing. Robertson Sutton provided guidance, drawing from her expertise in fitness training and stress management, but gave Kelly the final say about activities so she would have more ownership of the process.

Kelly incorporated a variety of indoor and outdoor workouts that were convenient to her schedule and held her interest. She started with Wii Fit, adding workouts at the gym on the treadmill or elliptical machine, and graduating to various exercise videos. She varied her fitness regimen every three months, planning the changes weeks in advance, so she would always have something new to anticipate. "I didn't allow myself to let boredom turn into disinterest," says Kelly.

She also saw her physician for assistance in planning a reduced-calorie diet that did not eliminate any food groups, and used the diet-tracking site SparkPeople.com.

In weekly phone sessions over three months, Robertson Sutton and Kelly reviewed progress and brainstormed solutions for upcoming challenges. The biggest potential roadblock loomed across the Atlantic Ocean: a 10-day vacation to Italy, one of Europe's premier gastronomic countries. "Previously I had dreaded vacations because I knew I'd blow it," Kelly says.

This time, she stuck to the travel activity and nutrition plan she and Robertson Sutton devised (which included walking

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Wellness coaches guide clients in making lifestyle changes, such as better nutrition.

and hiking, and eating a light breakfast), and returned to America 1 pound lighter—without depriving herself of moderate portions of pasta and gelato. Kelly brought back a powerful new realization of her own from the birthplace of the Renaissance: “I am a person who lives healthfully wherever I am,” she says.

**THOSE INTERESTED IN FINDING A WELLNESS** coach might begin their searches on the Websites of coach-training schools. Wellcoaches Corporation, in partnership with the American College of Sports Medicine, trains and certifies approximately 1,000 coaches per year. Its Website, Wellcoaches.com, maintains a database of certified coaches, including biographical and contact information.

Like personal trainers, wellness coaches often work in health clubs or fitness centers. Some companies, hospitals, employee-assistance programs and health-insurance providers also contract with coaches or even hire them as in-house employees.

In any setting, it's important to research a prospective coach's qualifications; because wellness coaching is a relatively new and, therefore, unregulated profession, literally anyone can put out a “Wellness Coach for Hire” sign. Find out about a coach's years of experience; education; relevant certifications (two established certifications are Wellcoach and Intrinsic Coaching); licensure, if the coach is a nurse or other medical professional; and memberships in coaching or wellness professional associations.

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A wellness coach usually asks new clients for an initial commitment of three months, and may have monthly or per-session rates. Sessions typically range between \$50 and \$150 or higher, depending on the market and a coach's background. Weekly or biweekly sessions are flexibly scheduled and may take several

**"This is truly a transformation—of mind, body and spirit."**

forms, Sager says. "I work with clients as they prefer. Some do well with a phone call, as it is convenient and fits in to a busy schedule. Others prefer a face-to-face meeting. Many coaches work with out-of-town clients. It is not optimal, in my opinion, when working with fitness and nutrition, but it is done."

Consider, along with formal preparation and experience, whether a wellness coach's areas of expertise match your reasons for seeking coaching in the first place. For example, because Kelly knew she wanted to learn how to make activity a permanent part of her life, she selected a coach who had a master's degree in exercise science and multiple fitness certifications, in addition to a coaching credential. The partnership with Robertson Sutton led to her shift from being bored with "routine" exercise to embracing a variety of physical activities five days a week.

"I am enjoying a life in which I make choices about food and movement instead of the stresses of life making them for me," says Kelly, who eventually lost 20 pounds beyond the initial goal she set during wellness coaching. "I have maintained my ideal weight, and it has been one year since I began the journey. This is truly a transformation—of mind, body and spirit." ▲

Andrea Berninger Thomas is a writer, wellness educator and personal trainer.



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Puzzle on page 166.

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