

It's a Good Time to Be a Relationship Coach

Whether dating or divorcing, people are turning to coaches for their goal-oriented approach, which can deliver structure and achievements at a time when both may be lacking.

By **Alix Strauss**

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Sofia Montijo's first two-hour phone call with Samantha Burns in November 2020 was spent assessing Ms. Montijo's love life.

From then through May 2021, the women, who each live in Boston, focused on Ms. Montijo's mostly unsuccessful dating history for an hour every two to three weeks on FaceTime, and in weekly texts and emails. For Ms. Montijo, these conversations were supplemented with homework and workbooks; together, everything cost her \$3,500.

In June, Ms. Montijo, 37, started dating her current boyfriend. She described their relationship as the most successful one she has been in. "I knew I needed to change my dating patterns and I needed to find someone who specialized in that," she said of hiring Ms. Burns, a psychotherapist who in 2015 started a business coaching people through dating, relationships and even breakups.

Before the pandemic, Ms. Burns said she received about five applications from new clients a week. That number has since doubled, Ms. Burns said, as people have had more time to "look at their relationships and to work on themselves."

As a result, she and other relationship coaches say they have seen an uptick in business from people who seek the goal-oriented, future-thinking approach of their work. Some, like Ms. Montijo, see it as an alternative to therapy, which often focuses more on process and the past.

While she has never seen a therapist, Ms. Montijo said that "therapy feels A.D.D.-ish because you talk about everything." She added, "I saw Sam to understand how I can specifically date better."

Both coaches and therapists want to help people, Ms. Burns explained, "but coaches excel at a certain skill and want you to as well."

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"Coaching allows for direct feedback and change," she added. "Here you set a goal, then you meet it within a specific amount of time."

Max Alley, who lives in Queens, in 2018 left his job as a customer experience manager at the dating app Coffee Meets Bagel to start Matchup Coaching, which specializes in online dating. Before the pandemic, he said he would get five or six new clients a month; now, that number is nine or 10.



Max Alley, a coach in Queens who specializes in online dating, said he has received more inquiries from new clients because the pandemic made it harder for people to meet in-person. Lila Barth for The New York Times

He attributes his increase in clients to the fact that the pandemic made online dating the best — and sometimes only — way to meet others. “People realized their digital presence mattered more than their physical one,” said Mr. Alley, who charges \$200 for an initial two-hour consultation that includes tips on bio writing and picking photos, and \$100 an hour for follow-up sessions.

Jessica Ashley, a divorce coach in Chicago who specializes in helping mothers go through the process, said that the goal-setting element of coaching has become particularly appealing to clients because it can deliver structure and tangible achievements at a time when both may be lacking in people’s lives.

“We are having a coaching moment because we need someone to stand beside us and make a plan,” she said, “and then tell us we can do it.” Like many coaches, Ms. Ashley offers her services via packages, including a three-month plan that starts at \$3,300 and a six-month plan that starts at \$6,000. Business used to be reliably seasonal, she said, but has become steadier over the last two years.

“Back to school and after holidays were busier” before the pandemic, she said, but “in 2020 and through summer 2021, the busy season was constant.” Ms. Ashley added, “I’ve consistently had double the number of coaching clients than before it hit.”

Coaching does not require any specific requirements or degrees, though, and Ms. Ashley warns it has become “an industry flooded by people who aren’t experts.” She advises anyone interested in hiring a relationship coach to look for credentials like certifications. (Ms. Ashley completed a certification course developed by Divorce Coaching, Inc., a Florida company accredited by the International Coaching Federation, which is recognized as the industry’s primary credentialing organization.)

Many coaches also offer a complementary consultation via phone or video call to prospective clients, who should ask for these sessions if they are not advertised. Settling on the right coach, Ms. Ashley added, often comes down to “fit, chemistry, trust and an understanding of experience.”

Corinne Reynolds, 41, the director of advancement at Metropolitan Family Services in Chicago, where she lives with her daughter, hired Ms. Ashley in January 2020 when she was divorcing her now ex-husband. Though she was in therapy, Ms. Reynolds still felt overwhelmed. The pandemic made things worse, she said, by increasing her feelings of isolation.

“Therapy felt open-ended. I needed someone to give me advice, help me create a plan and have action steps,” said Ms. Reynolds, who worked with Ms. Ashley for six months.

“Jessica helped me set weekly goals and created a better morning routine for myself and my daughter,” she added. “She helped me find a lawyer and navigate the legal system. She reviewed my documents. I also joined her Facebook group of other moms going through this experience which made me feel less alone.”

Tirzah Stein, a licensed social worker in Denver, recently left her job in that field to start NearlyWed Coaching, which specializes in wedding and premarital coaching. Since opening her business in September, she has taken on 24 clients, with 18 signing up in February, she said.

Because coaches do not have the same approach as therapists, Ms. Stein said they can develop an intimacy with clients that can be helpful to achieving goals. “Being a coach, you don’t have the same boundaries as a therapist,” said Ms. Stein, who charges \$550 for four hourlong sessions and \$800 for eight. “You show your emotions and are a human being. I’m a best friend who is still connecting as a professional.”

Carly Wright, a 37-year-old firefighter and paramedic, and Chloe Wright, a 33-year-old psychologist, saw Ms. Stein together for four months ahead of their wedding on Jan. 8 in Denver. The couple, who live in Fort Collins, Colo., had differing opinions about their ideal wedding day, but felt therapy was not the right venue to hash them out.

“I didn’t want to go to couples therapy because there wasn’t a problem” with our relationship, said Carly Wright, who uses a gender-neutral courtesy title. “This was a specific problem navigating through an event that both of us were coming to from very different places.”

Mx. Wright added that coaching helped the two see each other’s point of view, in part because Ms. Stein “talked to us from a personal place. She told us what she did for her wedding and how other clients were navigating this same space.”

Said Mx. Wright, “A therapist wouldn’t be able to do that.”