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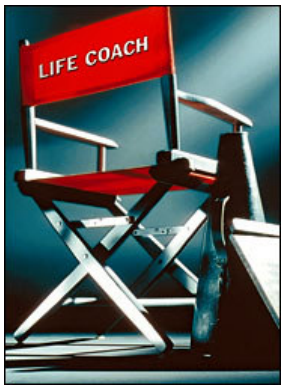
And I'd Like to Thank My Coach

By MIREYA NAVARRO

LOS ANGELES

WHENEVER Bryce Dallas Howard teased her dad, the actor and director Ron Howard, about how much actors are paid, he'd say, "It's so that they can afford their therapist."



But decades after her father made it in Hollywood, Ms. Howard, 25, is making her own way in acting, and she's therapist-free. She sees a life coach instead. Ms. Howard, who is on location filming "Spider-Man 3," said her coach helps her navigate the demands of show business on her own terms, including making time for writing and protecting a degree of privacy during press interviews without losing her cool.

"It's not about rehashing the past," said Ms. Howard, who said she's "really into self-improvement." She called Sherri Ziff Lester, her coach, after a manager friend passed on her name last year.

"With Sherri," she said, "it's, 'Let's talk about this week.' She asks me a series of questions so that I see my priorities and decide what I need to do."

Life coaching has become a staple on television, with coaches helping sort out the lives of single men, ugly ducklings, sexually unsatisfied wives and other women in shows like "Nip/Tuck," "The Swan," "Starting Over" and "Modern Men." Life coaches, with their vague self-helpish title, have also come in for considerable skepticism and ribbing. "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart" just this week devoted a sketch to poking fun at the coaching and "coachees" who become coaches themselves.

But behind the scenes life coaches are also finding plenty of work in the entertainment business. As their ranks swell nationwide — the International Coach Federation says its membership has doubled to 9,500 personal and business coaches since 2001, 56 percent of them in the United States — a growing roster is specializing in

celebrities and Hollywood.

Although the federation does not keep track of coach specialties, coaches who devote themselves to the entertainment business — many of them former actors, television network executives, film producers or scriptwriters who sell their services as insiders — say they have seen more acceptance and a doubling and even tripling of demand for their services in the last three or four years.

Life coaches, who are unregulated and vary widely in their training and credentials, say they help clients define and pursue career and personal goals. The action- and results-oriented approach, they add, is appealing in a business where so much seems left to chance and few are prepared for success when it happens.

In a profession with a propensity for coaching — the acting coach, the voice coach, the writing coach — there appears to be room for one more coach, the one in charge of happiness, not to be confused with the old-school therapist.

"The difference between life coaching and therapy is that psychotherapy is about helping people heal their wounds," said Phil Towle, a psychotherapist and life coach, "and coaching is about helping people achieve the highest level of their fulfillment or happiness or success, whether they're wounded or not." Mr. Towle's work (at the rate of $40,000 a month) with quarreling members of the band Metallica was chronicled in the 2004 documentary "Metallica: Some Kind of Monster."

Performers, directors, writers and others can now find workshops and programs with names like Center Your Celebrity and War and Peace in the Writers' Room, and they can find certificates for free coaching sessions in gift bags at events like the Oscars and the Video Music Awards.

Coaches say personnel officials at studios and production companies are also increasingly calling on them not just to groom executives in management skills (the traditional use of executive coaching in major corporations), but also to troubleshoot in situations like helping a young producer handle personality and power clashes on a production.

Scott Zakarin, 42, a film and television producer who most recently produced the reality series "Kill Reality" on E! and "The Scorned," the movie spawned by the show, credits his coach with saving his company. He said he turned to a life coach, David Brownstein, a few years ago because of confrontations and finger pointing in his production company and now has Mr. Brownstein on call as he strives to run his business without subsuming what he calls the visionary nature of his work.

Mr. Zakarin, who said he knew Mr. Brownstein when the coach was a film producer himself, said friends who have formed their own production companies have their own life coaches to deal with similar problems.

"Once they have their offices feng shui'd, coaching seems to be the next thing," he said.

Penelope Brackett, a career and life coach in New Jersey, said she was virtually alone when she started coaching performers in theater, television and film in New York in the early 1990's. In the last two years, she said, even drama schools have embraced the concept of "getting a life and not just building a career or devoting yourself to craft excellence."

A former actor, director and producer who last year published "Seven Keys to Success Without Struggle," a life-coaching book for performers, written with Lester Thomas Shane, Ms. Brackett said she is regularly asked to give seminars at universities like Brandeis and Rutgers.

Life coaches, who work in person or by phone and whose rates usually start at over $100 a session, partly credit the increased demand for their services to decentralized and scattered families: the life coach, some say,

takes the place of the mother, father or some other elder, who gave counsel through life's decisions and conflicts. That many people have more than one career and are searching for pursuits with more meaning also plays a role, they say.

In Hollywood coaches deal with short-term goals like easing writer's block so that a script gets finished as well as more encompasing challenges like hardening up-and-comers to take rejection or keeping those who make it from losing their heads in celebrity.

"Being famous is not what it looks like on E!" said Ms. Ziff Lester, a former writer on television shows like "Beverly Hills 90210" and "Baywatch." "It hits you like a tidal wave, and unless you can navigate that ocean, you will drown."

Carmit Maile, 31, the redheaded member of the Pussycat Dolls sextet, who recently changed her name from Carmit Bachar, said she started telephone sessions with Ms. Ziff Lester last July to keep her focused on what she wants to accomplish. The Dolls debut album, "PCD," went platinum, and just last week they embarked on a national tour, opening for the Black Eyed Peas.

Ms. Maile, who said she found a certificate for Ms. Ziff Lester's services in a gift bag given to performers at a concert last year, added that she does not want success to keep her from working with children with cleft lip and palate.

Ms. Maile, who had surgery for cleft palate, said she endured rejection in show business and wants to be a role model for girls like her who are not picture perfect. "My worry is to get lost in the shuffle of superstardom and not make an impact as a human being," she said, calling her coach a facilitator to help her stay the course. "There's so much that goes on that it's easy to lose your grounding."

Success can bring just as much soul searching behind the camera. Jeff Davis, 30, the creator and an executive producer of "Criminal Minds," a drama on CBS, went to a coach as he was trying to cope, he said, with "the struggles of political fights and wrangling of egos" that he found when his show went on television.

"I found myself going from writing scripts in a coffee shop one day to producing a television show in the blink of an eye," he said.

He described the difference as "working with 100 people, finding myself swamped with questions and having to become a leader when you've hardly been doing it on your own." Mr. Davis, who said he was referred to his coach, Mr. Brownstein, by his studio, added, "I never had so many meetings in my life."

Through coaching sessions twice a month, Mr. Davis got in touch, he said, with "my inner killer" and learned when to summon it and when to be nice.

He said he also realized he wanted to create another show, for which he said he is about to write the pilot.

The results, he said, have won him over to life coaching, despite his initial skepticism.

"The entertainment industry can certainly use some help, considering the number of lunatics who work in it," Mr. Davis added. "It's literally like having a personal trainer. A life coach's job is to push you."

But critics see life coaches as the ultimate overindulgence.

"This is for people with too much money," said Jon Winokur, a Los Angeles writer who included the term life coach in his Encyclopedia Neurotica, a 2005 volume of "tics, twitches and safety-valve nuttiness," which also includes entries like "retail therapy."

"You can find a market or a constituency for all kinds of insanity here," Mr. Winokur said.

The American Psychotherapy Association does not have an official position on coaches, but Kelly Snider, speaking for the association, said "coaches need to be responsible for recognizing if there's a problem that must be dealt with by someone in the field of psychology."

The International Coach Federation acknowledges that only a fraction of its members have gone through its certification process, which requires specific training and exams, because coaching has become more formalized only in the last decade or so. It urges consumers to shop around for those specifically trained in coaching skills.

Those who pay for life coaches, sometimes at a financial sacrifice, say they need the supportive kick in the pants.

"Life coaching has organized me and helped me do stuff more strategically," said Ari Shine, 30, a singer and songwriter who sees T. C. Conroy, a Hollywood coach who draws on her experience in the music business, including work with bands as a production coordinator. She is the former wife of Dave Gahan of the British band Depeche Mode.

Ms. Conroy's session with Mr. Shine on a recent Thursday took the form of brainstorming over the best booking agent for him. During another session, with Nancy Noever, a production manager for television commercials in her 40's who is trying to sell her first television script, the coaching blurred the professional with the personal.

"Weight is never where I want it to be, financial is never where I want it to be, time management is never what I want it to be," Ms. Noever said, as she sat on a sofa sipping from a water bottle across from Ms. Conroy, who took notes on a clipboard. "I have to figure out why can't I put myself first."

"Why you haven't put yourself first," Ms. Conroy corrected, noting she could do it.

Ms. Noever plotted ways to pay attention to her priorities — finishing the last 15 pages of her script, starting to lose 25 pounds, getting rid of her debt — with the expectation of not doing it perfectly the first time, as long as she set things in motion.

"I'm much more important than a McDonald's commercial," she said, her confidence renewed.

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