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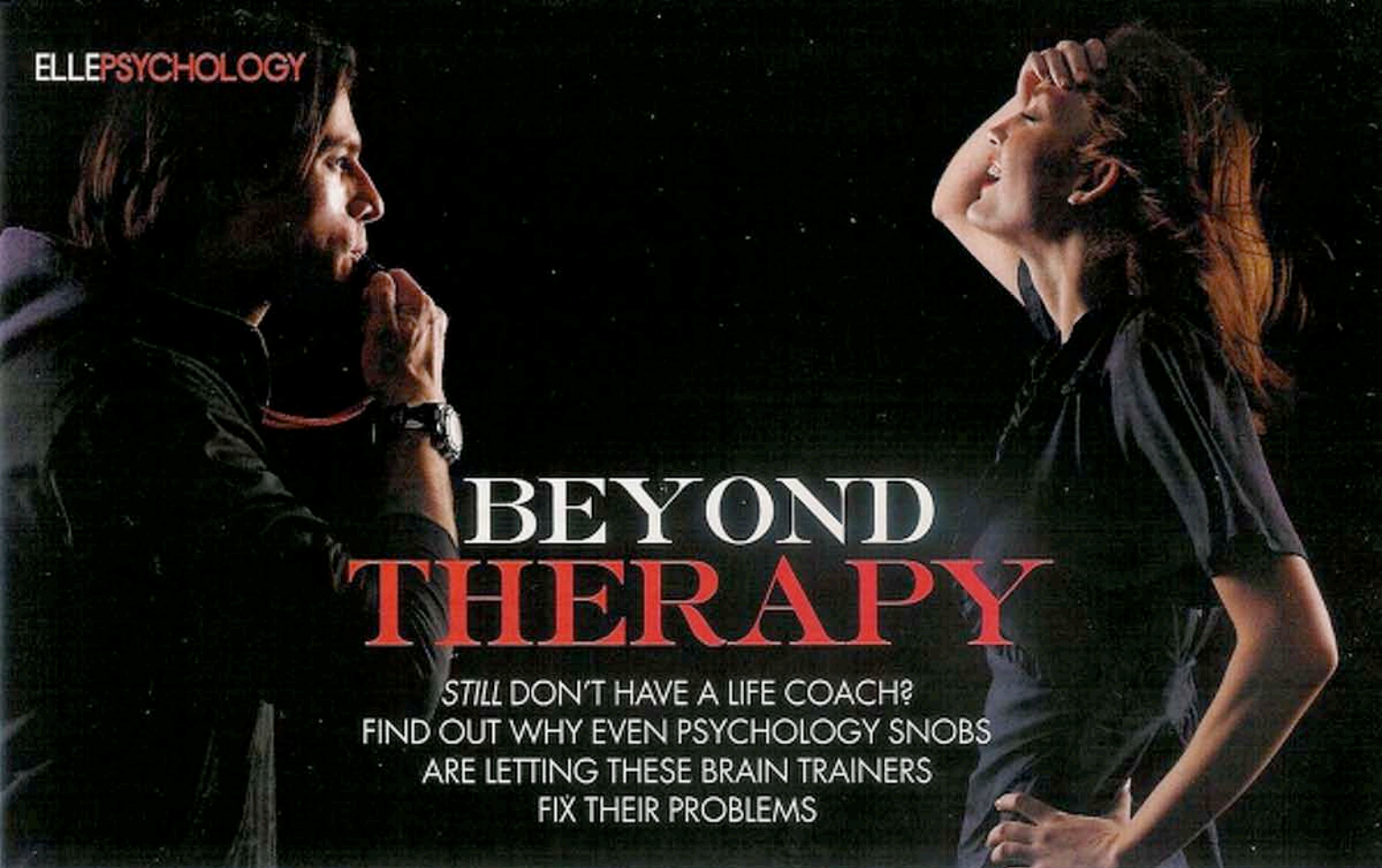
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# BEYOND THERAPY

STILL DON'T HAVE A LIFE COACH?  
FIND OUT WHY EVEN PSYCHOLOGY SNOBS  
ARE LETTING THESE BRAIN TRAINERS  
FIX THEIR PROBLEMS

The idea that personal transformation can be achieved by borrowing moves from some life coach's happiness playbook goes against what we therapized masses believe is possible for meaningful change. And yet there's no arguing with the burgeoning ranks of these couch doctors: Membership in the International Coach Federation has more than doubled to over 11,000 in just five years (that's not counting all those shingle-hangers who skip the 150-plus hours of required training). We asked three wisdom-seeking women to consult with Sherri Ziff Lester, founder of Los Angeles-based Rock Your Life Coaching, whose shamanlike status among her Hollywood clientele was documented last year in *The New York Times* (a former writer for *Beverly Hills, 90210*, she's clearly accomplished in the art of rescue from baroque human drama). After dozens of collective hours of emotional disgoring, tears, and affirmation-recitation, we hear...what's this? Results!

## NEXT ON MY LIST BY MEGHAN DAUM

Every day I set myself up for failure. It's a masochistic little game I've played with myself for as long as I can remember, a ritual as deeply ingrained as brushing my teeth: I make a list of goals. The list isn't long, but it's ridiculous. On any given day, the prosaic will bump against the fanciful with a thunderclap of impracticality. Let's take today: walk dog, answer 20 e-mails, finish this article, write book, call the plumber, run six miles, write the other book, meet friends for dinner at 8.

Notice the lack of differential between the feasibility of certain tasks and the utter preposterousness of others. It's conceivable that I can walk the dog, go running, and maybe finish this article. It's almost conceivable that I could answer 20 e-mails, though not at the level of verbiage and wit I demand of myself. It is not, however, possible that I will write a book today. I never paid this any mind. I'd walk the dog, answer 10 e-mails, finish an article, run three miles (slacker!), and then barely make it out the door in time to meet friends for dinner. By some standards, this might look like a successful day. But to me, I was a miserable failure.

When I met Sherri, founder of Rock Your Life Coaching, the word I used more than any other was *overwhelmed*. I was overwhelmed with work, overwhelmed with my social life, overwhelmed by my rickety house, overwhelmed (and often angry) with myself. I told her I was tired of feeling this way. I was prepared, I said, for her to tell me exactly what to do.

But Sherri is not in the business of telling people what to do. This was disappointing. A life coach, I'd imagined, would be like a personal trainer: Do 40 reps over here, 30 minutes of cardio over there, and be done with it. Instead, she helps people break through the barriers that are keeping them from living the lives they want to lead. That might sound like therapy, but it's a lot more efficient: She charges her fee (\$1,000) by the month, not by the 50-minute hour, and you don't have to schlep to her office, just make yourself available for weekly phone sessions. The thing was, I wanted her to take over my life, maybe even move in with me and eventually assume my identity so I wouldn't have to deal with myself anymore.

But Sherri won't come over and organize your closets. What she does, however, is listen. For nearly three hours, Sherri listened to me rant about how overwhelmed I was. I told her how my job as a newspaper columnist,



Daum

combined with freelance assignments and speaking engagements, volunteer work, a boyfriend, a wide circle of friends, a pet, and a house in constant need of repair caused me to feel like I had bitten off a piece of the earth and had broken all my teeth trying to chew it. I talked about how silly I felt for not being able to manage my life. I don't have kids, I'm healthy, and I can afford a cleaning lady, even though I feel so guilty about it that I have to clean the whole house before she comes.

This brought us to our first discovery (my word, not hers): guilt. I had a lot of it. I lived on it, even thrived on it. So Sherri gave me an assignment. I was to make a list of things I felt guilty about and then counter every item with an example of how I celebrated that very same thing. For instance: "I feel guilty that I have not fixed my electrical problem." "I celebrate that I own a house and even have electrical problems."

I know what you're thinking: If this woman's biggest problems revolve around faulty wiring, she'd better quit whining. But my paralysis over this issue, we discovered, spoke to a larger dilemma: I have a hard time asking for help. This is because for whatever reason I simply feel undeserving of help. I am a person who, three times, has dragged an air conditioner up two flights of stairs and installed it on my own. Twice I have driven myself home after having periodontal surgery and bled all over the steering wheel. Second to guilt, independence is a major touchstone of my self-concept. All of my adult life, my motto has been: "If I can't do it myself, it doesn't happen."

That's when Sherri gave me my first affirmation. Affirmations, while suspiciously New Age-sounding, are a behavior modification technique that purports to reprogram the mind with words. To that end, my next assignment was to say, "I joyfully accept help and support" 10 times, three times a day.

I didn't tell Sherri, but at first I thought this was kind of dumb. I did tell her it reminded me of the scene in *American Beauty* where the Annette Bening character repeats, "I refuse to be a victim!" But Sherri pointed out that an affirmation is a positive statement. I wouldn't be saying, "I won't refuse help and support." I'd be training my mind to view support as a component of being independent and responsible.

So I did the affirmations, at least

most of the time (being on my list, they sometimes went the way of "write novel"). And I called the electrician and he came and fixed my wiring. That was a relief, but within five minutes the feeling of being overwhelmed returned. I called Sherri for our weekly session.

"What are you hoping to get out of our conversation today?" she asked.

"I want you to fix my life!" I said. "I joyfully accept help and support and I want it from you!"

We talked about the concept of *overwhelmed*. Sherri wondered if I was misusing the word. After all, most of what was making me feel overwhelmed—my work, my relationship, my friends—were things that I loved and wanted in my life. As much as I felt it was all driving me crazy, I'd be even crazier (not to mention poverty stricken and miserable) without them. That led to my next—and, in retrospect, most valuable—assignment: Stop using the word *overwhelmed*.

Reader, it has been four weeks since my last *overwhelmed* (and I'm trying to hide my eyes while I type it). Instead, I've been experimenting with other words: *bustling*, *abundant*, *intense*, and when all else fails, *a total shitstorm*, but *hopefully I can make it to Friday*. Also, I made a pact with myself to accept social invitations only from people I truly enjoy spending time with. I gave myself permission to just partially clean the house before the cleaning lady

arrives. Mostly, though, I've recognized that the things that I thought were making me feel overwhelmed were also the things that made me happy. And since I'd be foolish to let go of those things just for the sake of having more time to organize my shoes, I decided not to change my life but alter the way I describe it to myself. After two months, I think I can honestly say that I'm no longer overwhelmed. I'm just me.

As for the list, I still keep it and it's still ridiculous. But I've now gotten wise to it. Maybe that's another way of saying that I've gotten wise to myself. For years, I've played my little game, telling myself I'll accomplish a lifetime's worth of work in a day. I know this is the part where I'm supposed to say that I now see how self-defeating that is, but the truth is sort of the opposite. I now realize that I set up the game not to make me fail, but to help me win. I'll never accomplish everything on my list, at least not in one day, but even if I check off a few items, I'll still be in the ninetieth percentile of productivity. I think my subconscious knew that all along. It just took me awhile to catch on.

I've also decided to make up my own affirmation: "I celebrate my list and play my game with joy." I told myself I have to say it 300 times in a row, eight times a day, but usually I say it only a few times a day. Oh and incidentally, when the seasons changed, I didn't take my air conditioner out of the window by myself—I asked my boyfriend to help me. He enjoyed every minute of it.

## MY MOTHER, MY FUTURE

By MIN K. LIESKOVSKY

Three and a half years ago, I slumped in a folding chair on the vast lawn of Harvard Yard, shivering in the misty rain and still a little drunk. The president droned on about how the world was our oyster while we waited for the moment to toss our mortarboards. I stumbled out in the clumsy line, sure of only one idea: I was meant for big things, I was going places. I took few emotional risks, avoiding both confrontation and love, and thus avoided the sadness that plagued some of my peers. I wasn't stupid; I knew I was closing my heart, but I had finals and papers due.

By age 25 I'd expected—quite reasonably I thought—to have published the Great American Novel, or at least have earned my first million in an Internet buyout. I didn't expect to be left without a plan when my ill-conceived move to New York drained my savings, my get-rich-quick website scheme failed, my screenplay languished unoptioned, my promising romance with a male model rotted, my estranged father died suddenly, and my mother's forgetfulness progressed into Alzheimer's. Least of all did I expect that my Christmas vacation at home in the Bay Area last winter would stretch into almost a year of waitressing and caregiving for my rapidly deteriorating mother. No, I wasn't expecting any of that.

I had accomplished one thing, however: I was now fully in touch with my emotions. And it was the worst thing ever to happen to me. One week to the next I would



seize upon a new career—lawyer, botanist, sitcom writer—and take my lack of progress as a sign of total failure. More than anything, I wanted my mother's counsel, her words of support. But the mother I needed was only partially present, and now her words were more often manipulative, needy, and guilt-inducing than they were consoling.

I was a disaster. I cried in post offices, Chinese restaurants, Taco Bell drive-thrus, bathrooms, and parties. I cried while waiting. But mostly I cried in bed, alone. My increased emotional connectedness finally had allowed me to let my guard down with people. But in opening these floodgates I had completely debilitated the rational, functional half of myself.

When my friend from ELLE called with the offer to set me up with a life coach, I'd just gotten off my dinner shift at the bistro and had eased my mom's beat-up red Volvo to a 24-hour Safeway to pick up some beer. My face shone with fryer grease and my cheap black clothes hung limply beneath my apron. I couldn't have been further away from college, from who I had been and who I wanted to be. Nearby, a bunch of Stanford boys were hollering about which alcohol to buy; one lobbed a bottle of margarita mix overhead and belted, "Dude, I hope some hot girls show up tonight!" looking straight past me.

"I'll do it," I said.

When I looked at Sherri's website the next day, I cringed at her unbridled enthusiasm, the army of exclamation points marching across the screen. The questionnaire I filled out asked the basic stuff—goals, values, weaknesses, and strengths—that I'd rattled off for interviewers to depict the idealized version of myself. I was someone who'd cheated even at the Myers-Briggs personality test. And so I decided to try something new: bare-assed honesty. Some goals seemed within my grasp: "write things," "do well on the LSAT," and "get sleep," while others were less attainable: "healthy future marriage," "self-confidence," and "job in NYC that pays bills and allows time for friends and writing." That last one seemed

especially unreasonable.

I took our first phone call at noon in a park, on a patch of lawn between picnic tables. Sherri's voice was warm and cheerful as she asked about my intellectual interests (anthropology, tropical plants, comedy writing) and recreational interests (swimming in the ocean, reading, making out). We spoke for three hours, and I had to plug my phone into the outlet next to the water fountain after two.

I've had casual dalliances with therapy before: I've sat impassive before child psychologists while playing with magnets; I've talked to Harvard-paid social workers for garden-variety student malaise. But unlike the others, Sherri refused to indulge me. She would announce she was "calling me on something" when I'd say things that were deliberately dissembling or self-maligning—"I don't care what they think" or "I'm a terrible person." There was an equal number of tears and curses on my end, a fact that did not escape the notice of the mothers watching their babies take their first steps to the sound of my nose-blowing and f-bombs.

## TRYING TO BE IRONIC WITH A LIFE COACH IS HARDER THAN LOOKING COOL WHILE FOLK DANCING.

We talked twice a week. The goals she helped me set were concrete, such as filling out applications for doctoral programs, and personal, such as coming to terms with my sadness about my mother's declining health. I'd previously made sport of critiquing my therapists' clumsy psychological theories, but Sherri kept our discussions grounded in the practical, offering techniques for

interacting with my mother in meaningful ways without losing my temper.

At first, I bristled at her exhortations to find my "center" and "personal strength," but I grew accustomed to her lexicon. I'm not sure what made me sheath my cynical-analytical knife when she waxed inspirational, though part of it was the complete embarrassment of what we were doing: trying to be ironic with a life coach is harder than looking cool while folk dancing. Moreover, our phone relationship meant I couldn't read her eyes and try to manipulate her or worry if she liked me or not.

More difficult to stomach were the affirmations. We thought of one during the first session, and she made me yell it to her: "I have reached a new level of achievement and happiness with confidence in myself?" I held the phone at arm's length, to be polite. I was to recite it 10 times in the morning and 10 times at night. I scrawled it in marker on big index cards and littered them around the house. For once, I was glad that men never visit my bedroom.

Seven weeks have passed and I can't say

I'm the psychological equivalent of those before-and-after photos for diet supplements. I still cry too much for my liking. My mother still has Alzheimer's, obviously. But I finally took the LSAT and lined up a few job interviews in New York, where I'm moving next week. My family and I made arrangements for my mother's care that have assuaged, if not erased, our guilt and her fears. While internal changes are more difficult to identify, my overreactions to the daily catastrophes of life have been mitigated by understanding and reason. I've also come closer to identifying what I want from my future and learning how to retain it around the influence of others.

It's difficult to know what to attribute directly to the life-coaching and what to ascribe to feeling fed up with my life and deciding to change. It's clear that the two can't be separated, so I'll give Sherri the credit. But, on the other hand, my life coach says that I should take credit for my own strength. So I will.



# AMBITIONLESS ME

By RORY EVANS

Woman Benched by Life Coach." For more than a year, I'd had that *Onion* headline hanging on my refrigerator. I loved its absurdity, like the *Saturday Night Live* skit in which Jim Belushi plays the hotheaded high school chess coach. As if a woman's life, like that dorky chess team, called for coaching?

Of course, I'd heard of the vocation; I was aware that Oprah was a believer. But I'd assumed that it was for go-getters with plucky career-gal haircuts, whereas I feel like I brush up against my ambitionlessness on a near-daily basis. All around me are people architecting their rise to power. My friend Katie, for instance, readily admits she wants an empire. I just want an ottoman—a place to put my feet up and sit back for a good few weeks.

Just as some of my friends fantasize about big fat raises and promotions, I dream about retirement. Ever since my now-husband, Jamie, moved to New York in 2003 to be with me, we've been casually plotting our escape to a mellower, faded-rose kind of city, where I wouldn't have to work all the time. There's a street up in Harlem called Strivers Row, but that term could easily be used for the entire city of New York.

I'm not a striver, though. My various freelance jobs so persistently exhaust me that I can't fathom wanting more. Then that listlessness bleeds out to the other parts of my life: On weekend nights, I'll see women all dressed up, tottering in high heels toward some social

diversion, and I'll think, I could no sooner go to a bar/restaurant/party right now than walk on the moon.

All of this was reflected in my Inventory—the first (and only) bit of paperwork I did when, lo, I signed on with Sherri and Rock Your Life Coaching. What are my 10 life goals? To own real estate (No. 9); to be happy (No. 1); to swim in the ocean in the dead of winter (No. 10). What do I value? My parents, sisters, and husband; my friendships; and, going back to my feet on that ottoman, relaxation.

But having a coached life, it turns out, isn't about relaxation. Sherri believes in breakthroughs. So I decided I wanted clarity if not a possible answer to a question that my husband and I had discussed only very casually: Should we have a kid? (We always treated this the way we might discuss what's for dinner. "Do you think we should have a baby?" "I dunno. What do you think?" "I dunno. What do you think?")

It didn't help that my quest for clarity entailed weekly "homework" consisting of initiating deep, dark, moody-mood conversations with Jamie, who, mired in his uncoached life, questioned my questions right back: "Who needs to know, you or the LC?" He kept coming back to how *inorganic* the conversations were, while I had a semi-bone-rattling revelation: He and I talk all the time about all kinds of things and puzzle over no shortage of topics. Yet, counterintuitively, we tend to do most of our soul-exposing

only after some mungo, lung-cleaning argument. If I really wanted clarity, I had to be courageous enough to walk into these conversations directly, and then treat the matter with my heart instead of my head, as Sherri liked to say. (She had me imagine how I would feel if we never had a kid. "Not death-bed scenarios, either," she insisted. "How will you feel on any given day five years from now, 10 years from now....")

## I CAN'T ROCK MY LIFE JUST BY SITTING THERE BLEATING ABOUT IT. (CUE THE MORGAN FREEMAN VOICEOVER: "GET BUSY LIVIN', OR GET BUSY DYIN'.")

In finally getting around to the pith of the question I was shocked to hear that Jamie is less hot on having a kid than I'd thought (he volunteer-coaches five-year-olds in hockey...on Friday nights). Prior to that, I'd assumed that he was not pressing the point out of respect for me, as if ceding to my indecision. With the shock, though, came a huge sense of relief, because it was the rare instance where I couldn't, and shouldn't, wrest control of the tiller.

The larger benefit of the homework was that I had to be *accountable* for my time and mission—because I can't rock my life just by sitting there bleating about it. (Cue the Morgan Freeman voiceover: "Get busy livin', or get busy dyin'.") The eeriest part about the six-week experience



was how much, in purposely animating myself around the baby puzzle, I became energized in so many other parts of my life. I kept envisioning the intricate works of a wristwatch—how when one tiny little gear starts whirring, all the other gears are set in motion. One week, part of my homework was to figure out how I could be happier, since I'd listed it as Life Goal No. 1. In thinking about it, I came to the startling but also freeing conclusion that I already am pretty happy, and that maybe I'd written it down because it seemed like one of those things everyone should strive for, like healthy gums. I will always love Sherri for calling me out: "Do you think being a smart, critical thinker doesn't go with being happy? Do you think cheery, positive people are kinda dumb?" I was forced to recognize the folly that thinking of myself as smart precluded allowing myself to be happy.

I also had to figure out where my "passion" lies—which meant overcoming a severe allergy to the word itself, with its *Playboy* centerfold questionnaire connotation. What if I just considered what made me happy on a daily basis? What leapt to mind was the intense satisfaction I get when making small, cute, useless things. I think in some circles, where the participants have less shame, this is called crafting. Honestly, having this little epiphany then motivated me—like those wristwatch gears—to

get creative around my apartment. I hung a picture rail. I cut matte board. I framed about a dozen photographs and drawings. I knit a hat. Then, at the heels of all the other invigorating commotion, Jamie and I up and bought a house in Buffalo, with the idea that we would eventually move there. On the road to Life Goal No. 9!

In the end, my cynicism had given way to catharsis. Maybe I wasn't any closer to knowing if we'll ever have a kid, but I knew for sure that I am not as ambitionless as I thought. Yes, I've chosen to keep my career in a holding pattern, but I can still strive for satisfaction in other areas. I started telling my friends they had to ditch their shrinks and get a life coach instead. I kept using myself as an example. Look at me: I'm off the bench! □