

MY LIFE WITH A HEALTH COACH (OR HOW I STARTED EATING LESS AND LIVING MORE)

by Michele Shapiro



I'm big on New Year's resolutions—particularly the overambitious ones that have me feeling rotten about myself by the time I've flipped my first calendar page.

This year, however, I got smart: Rather than drawing up a mile-long list of my usual fitness and weight-loss goals (work out more, eat less) and dozens of things I'd like to change about myself, I resolved to find someone who'd help provide SOLUTIONS rather than more unattainable resolutions.

My immediate thought was to hire a health coach—someone who, like a life coach, could provide practical advice on meeting my fitness and nutrition goals. I wasn't even sure such a person existed, but I knew from years of working on staff at a national women's health magazine that the nutrition advice of professional fitness trainers can't always be trusted, and that nutritionists usually aren't the go-to pros for workout advice. Fortunately, my friends at the Ladies Who Launch Web site helped me put out a call for health coaches (under the auspices that I'd write a firsthand account of my experience when and if I did find one) and, within days, I received e-mails from dozens of women who'd made it their life's work to help others feel better about themselves.

A few of the e-mails leapt out at me, and I promptly flagged them. One in particular seemed as if it were written directly to me (even though the writer was completely unaware of who'd put out the call or why). Lois Barth (www.lusciouslivingwithlois.com) bills her business as "Whole Body Coaching" and specifically addresses those of us who, like me, know what it takes to be healthy but, for one reason or another, tend to sabotage ourselves before we get there. "I support a vision that is based around my clients' values, interests, and passions," she writes. "Instead of getting into the 'I shouldn't eat sugar' diet head, they can then move into 'My vision is health and vitality, and eating sugar doesn't support that.' Big difference!" I didn't have to read another word. After all, at 44, with two stomach surgeries under my belt and a saggy pooch hanging over it, I'd gone from Atkins to the Zone in search of a way to curb my sweet tooth and drop some poundage. I was ready to get to the root of my eating issues: Why did I evolve daily from a saint at breakfast to a soup-eater at lunch and, ultimately, a sinner at around 4 p.m. when my pre-dinner hunger pangs set in? Why, after a bout with appendicitis in college and a subsequent C-section, was I to believe that my core would ever bounce back again to the way it was in the days when I did my Jane Fonda workout videos?

I reached out by phone to my future Whole Body Coach, and we made a plan to meet for an hour-and-a-half session the following week. Barth explained that she usually coaches clients by phone for a three-month period. But since I had a deadline looming and needed her to condense several sessions into as few as possible, she suggested that we meet in person at the Manhattan space she shares with her dentist husband. (I figured if all else failed, maybe he could find a way to extract my sweet tooth!)

In the interim, Barth sent me an exhaustive background questionnaire filled with dozens of questions such as, "What do you still need to accomplish to feel fully satisfied in your life?" and "What pisses you off most of all?" Each question was then broken down into baby steps (i.e., "What five things do you think you need to do to make this happen?"). Two hours after beginning the opus, I felt I'd already begun thinking differently about my life: larger picture, and then smaller steps. Maybe breaking things down in that way would help me to eat better and exercise more as well.

SESSION 1

The day of my first appointment, Barth greeted me at the door with a wide grin and led me into a room with two rattan chairs facing each other. A tabletop fountain gurgled and a few sweetly scented candles overpowered the small space.

Barth said that, based on my questionnaire, she thought creativity was a big value of mine, and that I should attempt to incorporate it into my everyday life. She encouraged me to write a "Creativity List" of 15- to 20-minute activities I could do in the late afternoon when my energy waned. "It'll be a creative snack of sorts, which can be combined with a healthy snack or may eventually take the place of it," she explained. I'd often struggled to wake up an hour earlier to exercise or write in my journal, but it had never occurred to me to take a late-afternoon creativity break, and I was eager to give it a try.

Then I talked about my husband and how we're often at odds when it comes to food: I like cleanly prepared fish and chicken dishes, while he prefers red meat (and lots of it), and often drowns even the freshest vegetables in butter. Rather than suggesting marriage counseling, Barth offered a "what if" (as in, "What if the two of you were to take a healthy cooking class together?"). I thought the idea was genius for two reasons: First, it would give us something to do on our weekly "date night" other than overindulge at our favorite neighborhood restaurants. And it would possibly help bridge the divide between our wildly divergent cooking philosophies.

By the end of our first session, Barth had left me with much food for thought, and the numbers for everyone from a great female trainer (who specializes in core work) to a chiropractor who may be able to stave off my monthly migraines.

On the evening before our second meeting, exactly a week after the first, I received another worksheet via e-mail from Barth. For this one, I had to write everything I'd accomplished since our first session. Much to my amazement, the five points she'd allotted me were not enough. My energy was soaring. I'd written a Creativity List; tried a dance class—something I hadn't done since I ditched ballet at age 8; restructured a book proposal that had been collecting dust on my hard drive and rearranged the hundreds of books on my shelves by the color of the spines. (I'd gotten the idea months ago from a decorating magazine, but had buried the inclination to act on it until now.) Now my apartment looks a whole lot better and I'm already beginning to feel better. I'm excited to see what changes Session 2 will spark.

SESSION 2

I arrived at Barth's office a few minutes late because I'd had a run-in with a clueless barista at Starbucks who had insisted on fixing me one tea with two bags rather than two individual cups of chamomile tea. But after a few sips, we got down to business. I said the one "take home" exercise that had tripped me up a bit that week was rating my hunger before I ate anything. Lois suggested I think of it more as a meditative experience than a scale; in other words, how was I feeling when I reached for a handful of salty chips or M&M's? Was my body achy? If so, where? Was it something else I was actually craving that I was using food to replace?

From there, we moved on to a new exercise, which involved grafting a successful model from my professional life onto my personal life. In other words, what traits had made me rise in the ranks of the magazine publishing biz, and how could I use these traits to achieve similar success outside the office? The exercise caused me to think back on each of the turning points in my career: I'd landed my first job at a consumer magazine more than a decade ago when the publication's editor-in-chief had phoned me for a reference. (She was actually looking to hire a writer who freelanced for the small, nonprofit film magazine at which I worked.) I asked her about the magazine that she was launching, which turned out to be the New York edition of London's highly successful *Time Out*, and when I found out she had yet to hire a film editor, I literally ran over to her office—which coincidentally was one door away from mine!—and hand-delivered a resume and clips. I realized that each time I'd moved to a different magazine throughout the years, and oftentimes to a more senior-level position, I'd acted with the same gusto and sense of immediacy. Sometimes I sought out opportunities, sometimes they sought me out, and sometimes we met each other half way. But in every case, I exhibited tenacity, I asked questions, and I didn't sit around waiting for my phone to ring.

Why, then, when it comes to losing weight do I give up so easily? As Lois pointed out, it didn't take two months to put on the excess weight and it will take a lot more than two months to get it off.

The same goes for my desire to eat healthier. Why hadn't I been able to negotiate with my husband about preparing meals with less fat and butter as I would with a prospective employer about salary and benefits?

In addition to the cooking classes (which would probably have to wait until I had a little more cashola in my pockets), Barth suggested that we start a new family tradition: Cookbook Nights, for which each of us (my husband, my daughter, and I) would each be assigned a course or an element of the main dish (protein, veggie, starch), and then we'd look through cookbooks and online to find great recipes that we could each prepare. I love the playfulness of this idea, and it will give us the opportunity to eat together as a family at least once a week and, hopefully, to begin thinking more carefully about what we put in our mouths.

Toward the end of our session, I expressed concern about returning to an office environment next month (I'm filling in for an editor while she's on maternity leave) and sabotaging all the wonderful practices I'd put into play since my last session—from attending "Power Dance" and hatha yoga classes to taking late-afternoon "Creativity Breaks." Barth likened my return to 9-5 (or in my case, 10-6) life with training for a marathon. She said rather than thinking of it as an either/or situation—either I work or I find the time to feed my soul—I need to "cross-train" by carving time out for both in my schedule. In order to continue feeling energized and harmonized, I'll need to devote equal time to my spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental needs.

Though that seems like a virtually impossible task while also meeting the needs of my daughter, my husband, and my boss at work, I will remember the words with which Lois closed our session: "Self-care is the fuel which moves you along in busy times." I will also remember just how good it feels to be in touch with myself again.

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