

Directing your life



Wellness coaches can help people with MS get on the right track.

by Matt Alderton

If life were a movie, multiple sclerosis might feel like an unwelcome plot twist. It certainly did for 33-year-old Lauren of Washington, D.C. When she was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS in 2017, Lauren, who asked that her last name be withheld to protect her privacy, had a hard time coping. So, she did what smart thespians do when they need help playing a new part: She sought direction from behind the camera.



Kate Costello, health and wellness coach at

Wildcrafted Wellness.

Photo courtesy of Kate Costello

“If I’m the actress, Kate is the director,” Lauren says of her adviser, health and wellness coach Kate Costello of Wildcrafted Wellness in Washington, D.C., and Bethesda, Maryland. “I’m the performer, but she helps me get on the right track.”

Costello agrees. “A good director helps an actor actualize their role. I don’t tell Lauren what to do, exactly; I help her be the best actress she can be in the role that she’s playing.”

Of course, MS isn’t a role at all. It’s a reality. And with the help of a wellness coach, people with MS can learn tools and techniques that help them manage it.

What is a wellness coach?

Wellness coaches, also known as health or life coaches, help clients create a vision for their wellness, develop personalized strategies to create healthier habits and support them during each step of their journey.

“Coaching is about helping someone be their best self,” says wellness coach Barbara B. Appelbaum of Appelbaum Wellness in Deerfield, Illinois. “A coach doesn’t tell a person what to do or how to do it. Instead, a coach asks powerful open-ended questions to help a person figure out what it is they truly want and how they want to get there.”

In that way, a coach differs from other professionals who might be part of a person’s wellness team. A doctor might prescribe medication. A nutritionist recommends a food plan. A physical trainer sets up an exercise routine. A wellness coach, on the other hand, “plays on the same field as the individual,” Costello explains. “It’s not about the coach’s plan; the client directs the whole thing. It’s completely collaborative.”

Appelbaum agrees.



**Barbara B. Appelbaum,
wellness coach at
Appelbaum Wellness.**

Photo courtesy of Barbara B.
Appelbaum

“A coach is an accountability partner,” she says. “Because it’s much easier to achieve your goals if you have someone helping and championing you along the way.”

Another important distinction is wellness coaches’ focus on holistic health and well-being. A wellness coach is trained to combine all the myriad aspects of one’s well-being — physical, mental and emotional health, for example, as well as social and even professional wellness — in order to create a larger picture. This can be especially meaningful for people with MS, says Mindy Couture, an MS Navigator with the National Multiple Sclerosis Society and owner of Courageous Heart Life Coaching, a coaching practice based in Littleton, Colorado.

“MS, of course, is a big part of somebody’s life. But it’s just a part. The role of a coach is helping you think about your whole health — the other hopes, dreams and desires you have,” Couture says. “I hear from people all the time who say they have trouble moving on after their diagnosis. They get stuck. A coach’s role is to help them get unstuck and keep moving forward.”

Managing MS

Because wellness can be physical, mental, emotional or even social, anyone can benefit from wellness coaching, proponents say. But for exactly the reasons Couture describes, people with MS often find it especially advantageous. After she was diagnosed with MS, for example, Lauren felt angry, depressed and dispirited. Over time, coaching helped her feel whole again.

“In a situation that feels so out-of-control, having someone who can keep you grounded is vital,” explains Lauren, whose coaching sessions with Costello focus on, among other things, overcoming negative belief patterns — separating Lauren from her disease — and correcting negative self-talk. This includes learning to have compassion for herself by reframing internal dialogue around optimism instead of pessimism. “I take a disease-modifying therapy (DMT), for example. Instead of thinking about it negatively, I’ve learned to think about it as me doing something good for myself.”

By thinking positive thoughts, Lauren has discovered that she can manifest positive feelings. “I do regress at times,” she admits, “but through this process, I’ve realized that I am not MS. I have some MS symptoms, but MS isn’t me. I’m still Lauren, and I can do anything.”

Negativity can come just as quickly from external sources as from internal ones, says Appelbaum, who was diagnosed with MS in 2006. When they get together virtually or in person, she says, people with MS sometimes end up in a negative feedback loop that’s fueled

by a sense of shared suffering. When that happens, a coach can be a voice of positive dissent.



**Mindy Couture, MS
Navigator with the
National Multiple
Sclerosis Society and
owner of Courageous
Heart Life Coaching.**

Photo courtesy of Mindy
Couture

“There’s a tendency in the MS community to want to jump in and say, ‘Yeah, it sucks. I’m suffering, too,’ ” Appelbaum says. “A wellness coach can break that cycle by saying, ‘It’s OK. Vent for a minute. But after that, let’s do something about it.’ ”

Although people with MS should seek medical advice only from their healthcare providers, a wellness coach can help them execute their provider’s advice. In that way, coaching can support physical as well as mental wellness. If someone with gait issues has been prescribed stretching exercises or walking, for example, a wellness coach may be able to help them establish routines, incentives and behaviors that help them achieve their physical therapy objectives.

“Whatever your goals are, a coach can help by providing motivation and accountability, and by helping you find ways to make the work fun,” Couture says.

Are you ready for change?

A coach can help you set goals. It’s important to realize, however, that it ultimately is up to you to achieve them.

“I believe that coaching is an amazing, important investment in yourself, your health and your quality of life. Before you invest in a coach, however, you need to be in a place where you’re ready to be coached,” Couture says. “Just showing up for coaching doesn’t improve your life. You have to be committed to yourself, committed to your goals and committed to making the changes you want to see in your life.”

Because changes won’t happen overnight, expect to work with a coach for anywhere from several months to a year. After that, you should feel empowered enough to be your own coach.

“After coaching, you should have a newfound ability to handle on your own whatever the next issue is that you encounter in your life,” Costello says. “The end goal is to have the capacity to be your own change master.”

4 questions to ask your coach

Because the client-coach relationship can be extremely intimate, it’s important to find a coach with whom you’re comfortable.

“It’s important to interview a few people before you decide on a coach because you’re going to have to be vulnerable with that person,” says 33-year-old Lauren of Washington, D.C., who asked that her last name be withheld to protect her privacy. “It’s like finding a doctor. You’ve got to see who you connect with.”

Asking the following questions can help you narrow down your choices based on budget, style and experience:

1. What are your fees?

Coaches typically charge by the hour, and their rates can vary dramatically depending on their location and experience, says wellness coach Barbara B. Appelbaum of Appelbaum Wellness in Deerfield, Illinois, who adds that coaches who are just starting out might charge \$75 per hour. MS Navigator Mindy Couture, owner of Courageous Heart Life Coaching in Littleton, Colorado, estimates that the average is closer to \$100 per hour. However, the top coaches can earn up to \$500 per hour or more. All coaches, Appelbaum says, should be willing to offer the first session free so you can assess whether you’re a match.

If \$100 per hour is too steep, there are a few ways you might be able to save money. For example, Appelbaum says some coaches offer services on a sliding scale for low-income clients, and most sell packages — a bundle of 10 sessions, for instance — at a discounted rate. Some coaches even offer group coaching, says Couture, who adds that a group setting allows coaches to provide services at a lower cost.

Although insurance and health savings accounts typically do not cover coaching, some employers might subsidize it as part of their wellness benefits, says health and wellness coach Kate Costello of Wildcrafted Wellness in Washington, D.C., and Bethesda, Maryland.

2. Where will we meet, and how often?

Coaching may take place in person but often is offered virtually. Although arrangements vary, Appelbaum says formal sessions typically last for 45 minutes to an hour and take place once per week, with an allowance of shorter communications by text message and email. Remote sessions can take place by phone or video chat.

3. What are your qualifications?

Not all coaches are created equal. To ensure a coach is the real deal, look for either a degree or a professional certification — or both. Some wellness coaches, for example, have a master's degree in health and wellness coaching from an accredited university. Others are graduates of various coaching academies and workshops. The gold standard, Appelbaum says, is a credential from the International Coach Federation (ICF), which certifies professional coaches and offers a searchable directory of ICF-credentialed coaches on its website. If your coach is not ICF-certified, ask where they were trained and take the initiative to look up the program. When you do, you can see what was required — an hour-long internet course, for example, or a year of dedicated training — and judge for yourself whether the coach has adequate experience.

4. Do you have experience with chronic illness?

Costello, Appelbaum and Couture agree: If you have MS, it would be nice to work with a coach who has experience with chronic illness generally or multiple sclerosis specifically — but it isn't necessarily required. On the one hand, a good coach should be able to help virtually any client with virtually any problem. On the other hand, a coach who's versed in MS is likely to have more empathy for their client. If your goals are specific to MS, consider a coach who specializes in clients with chronic disease. If your goals are external to your illness, that experience may be less important.

Matt Alderton is a Chicago-based writer and editor.

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