



SMART COOKIES

Should I have a money coach?

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This week in the New Yorker, Atul Gawande, surgeon and staff writer, questions the idea of coaching. After receiving an unexpected tennis lesson – that added 10 miles an hour to his serve, and then catching a glimpse of Rafael Nadal’s tennis coach, it hit him that most professional athletes use coaches. Why don’t doctors? He says his performance in the operating room reached a plateau and it seemed he had just stopped getting better. He brought on a coach to observe him and says that after observation, he had more to consider in their 20-minute conversation than he had had in the past five years.

If professional athletes, and top surgeons look to a coach, is it time for the financially unfit to do the same? For the millions of Canadians struggling to figure out their finances, or tackle their debt, a money coach could be the answer.

When Nancy Zimmerman hit rock bottom (she had her credit card cut up in front of her at a grocery store), she wasn’t sure where to turn. Debt counselling seemed extreme and a financial adviser likely wouldn’t take on someone debt-ridden with little to invest. Unsure of what to do, she started working on her finances solo.

She immediately set three goals for herself: take control of her finances, eliminate almost \$30,000 in debt, and own a home in Vancouver. She quickly checked the first goal off, but it took almost four years to complete the other two. After her success, she started coaching others. She worked with clients bi-weekly for three months. She’s since moved to an online model with her coaching, but still provides support and accountability for those figuring out their finances. She adds that most people feel relief when they unload their financial fears and finally have a plan of action.

“People come to see me usually with a lot of negative emotion around money: they’re ashamed, afraid, intimidated. It always helps to calm them down to look at the numbers. It’s kind of like the Wizard of Oz pulling back the curtain. It’s usually not as bad as people think,” says Ms. Zimmerman.

Sheila Walkington, a money coach in Vancouver with Money Coaches Canada says good coaches know how to tailor a plan specifically for their clients. You might be frustrated reading personal finance books that don't resonate with you or provide a distribution of income and expenses that works with your lifestyle. There's no one-size-fits-all model for personal finance.

“Money isn't really about money. We have smart doctors, lawyers, and accountants who still spend more than they earn,” she says. She adds that as a coach, it's her role to not only get to the root of the financial chaos, but to create a personal system that sticks. The bonus is the built-in accountability that comes with a coach. She meets with her clients five or six times over the course of four months. Usually, that's all it takes to create a sustainable plan.

Ms. Walkington, who started her career as a financial planner, has been coaching for more than eight years and says since the recession more people have started using her services. She says coaching is especially beneficial for individuals or couples who have hit rock bottom or who have a major life change coming up. Recently, Ms. Walkington coached soon-to-be parents. Shortly after discovering they were making room for a new member of their family they met with Ms. Walkington to create a nine-month plan. When the new baby arrived they had paid off more than \$9,000 in debt and sustainably pared down their lifestyle to afford a nine-month maternity leave.

Coaching has no regulatory professional standards, so the experience and knowledge of coaches can vary dramatically – and so can their rates. If you're looking to improve your backswing, your voice, or in Mr. Gawande's case, your surgical procedures, you consider a coach. If you're looking to improve your financial picture, then a money coach just might be your solution. A free consultation will help you determine if this route will add significant value to your money and your life, and ultimately improve your financial picture.