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SPENDING

Winning the Nutrition Game, With Help From a Coach

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN

MARIAM NOORZAI of Camarillo, Calif., struggled with [obesity](#) for 20 years and at one time weighed 279 pounds. She tried weight programs from Atkins to Weight Watchers, but it wasn't until she hired a personal [nutrition](#) coach last fall that she finally lost the excess weight, dropping to 128 pounds.

Her coach, Brian Zehetner of Minneapolis, is also the nutritionist at JamCore Training, an online personal training program. Ms. Noorzai joined JamCore 14 months ago, thinking that she would lose weight by exercising, but she said that it was happening "at a snail's pace."

That's when she decided to become one of Mr. Zehetner's private coaching clients. Because the two live so far apart, her sessions are conducted over the phone, and follow-ups are done largely by e-mail.

After Ms. Noorzai filled out a detailed health questionnaire and kept a three-day food diary, Mr. Zehetner gave her a customized diet plan and the reasoning behind it. From there, she steadily reshaped her eating habits.

Mr. Zehetner charges \$125 an hour, although his fee can be as high as \$650 for a package that includes comprehensive body composition and metabolic testing, menu planning and two coaching sessions.

He said individualized attention is often what a person needs to lose weight and keep it off. "You can go to Weight Watchers or Jenny Craig and reach your weight goal, but then you gain it back plus 10 pounds," he said. "I've seen it happen so many times, because maintenance is the toughest part."

Certainly, programs like Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers have helped many people lose weight, and often include one-on-one consultations. In an e-mail statement, Karen Miller-Kovach, chief scientific officer for Weight Watchers, said that her company's program "does more than count calories, fat and fiber; it also helps people change behaviors, learn how to eat healthier foods, and get more physical activity, all within a supportive environment."

And Jenny Craig's chief executive, Patti Larchet, said in an e-mail message that commercial weight-loss programs like hers have been validated as an effective method for losing weight.

But Ms. Noorzai is among a growing number of consumers who are going a step further — and paying more — by enlisting private, one-on-one coaches. Although many clients are motivated by a desire to lose weight, coaches say that others turn to them after learning that they have [diabetes](#) or high [cholesterol](#) levels — or because they wish to avoid chronic diseases later in life. Others want to deal with food [allergies](#) or to combat fatigue and sleep problems.

Nutrition coaches often rely on tests they conduct themselves, or those conducted by a physician, to determine problems related to blood sugar, hormone imbalances, cholesterol level, food allergies and even brain chemistry.

Stella Metsovas, a certified nutritionist and coach in Laguna Beach, Calif., said that many of her female clients complain of late-afternoon fatigue, which she addresses through dietary changes that keep blood-sugar levels stable. She also looks at possible food allergies and ways the body responds to stress throughout the day.

Armed with physiological and psychological data from a client, coaches like Ms. Metsovas can design a diet tailored to individual health concerns.

Margaret Moore, founder and chief executive of Wellcoaches, which trains health and fitness professionals, says nutrition is

a new and growing specialty in coaching. She said that her organization trained 1,000 coaches in its first four years of operation, from 2000 to 2004, and that it now trains 1,000 a year.

Nutrition coaches usually have a background in health, nutrition or medicine and some form of certification or licensing, from organizations like **Wellcoaches**, the International Coach Federation and the American Dietetic Association. Mr. Zehetner, for example, is a registered dietitian and a certified strength and conditioning specialist.

Cheryl L. Rock, a professor of family and preventive medicine at the [University of California](#), San Diego, said research shows that the personal coaching approach is very effective. But she cautioned consumers to be leery of advice from unqualified coaches. “Anyone can give nutrition advice, so it’s important to investigate their training and experience,” she said.

Services from nutrition coaches range from creating meal plans to shopping with clients, cooking for them and even stocking their cupboards. For executive clients who travel often, coaches give advice about what to order at restaurants.

Deborah Carabet, a licensed nutrition counselor, has offices in Los Angeles and New York. She is also a chef; she shops for groceries with clients and goes to their homes to demonstrate healthy cooking. Her coaching rate is \$250 to \$700 a session.

Nutrition coaches say baby boomers are the biggest consumers of their services. “Boomers want to prolong the middle of their lives,” said Mary Furlong, author of “Turning Silver Into Gold: How to Profit in the New Boomer Marketplace” and chief executive of Mary Furlong & Associates, a marketing firm. Boomers want an active, engaged life as they age, she said. “They want to work longer; they want to date,” she said. “How do you stay in the game if you aren’t healthy and energetic?”

Barbara Mohan, 55, a law-office administrator in Manhattan, hired a nutrition coach because a [gluten intolerance](#) made her feel bloated and lethargic, even though she had changed her diet. “I still felt something was wrong with me,” Ms. Mohan said.

Her nutrition coach, Brooke Kalanick, who is also a naturopathic physician (she attended a four-year naturopathic medical school and took a board exam) determined that Ms. Mohan had toxins in her stomach and treated her with natural supplements and a detoxifying diet. “I feel 100 percent better, my energy level is up, and I dropped weight,” Ms. Mohan said.

Nutrition coaches say that about 65 percent of their clients are female. “Men tend to wait until something goes wrong before they see someone,” Ms. Kalanick said. An example is Richard Green, 48, a real estate agent in Newport Beach, Calif., who received a diagnosis of persistent acid reflux. He was put on medication but still had symptoms, so he sought the services of Ms. Metsovas.

“We cut my fat intake and I learned what causes reflux,” he said. “Stella gave me recipes tailored to me. I’m single, have a demanding career and don’t want to spend an hour trying to put together a meal. Now I cook ahead of time on the weekends so I can just put meals in the oven when I get home from work.”

A few months after he began working with her, Mr. Green stopped taking his medication, lost some weight and found that he had more energy.

Nutrition coaches generally charge \$100 to \$300 an hour, whether the session is in person or over the phone. Ms. Kalanick charges \$250 for the first visit, which lasts about 90 minutes and includes the development of a nutrition plan. Follow-up coaching sessions are \$100 for a half-hour. Some of her clients require weekly sessions; others see her every few months.

MS. NOORZAI finds coaching so crucial to her well-being that she has cut certain luxuries out of her life to afford the several hundred dollars a month for her weekly phone sessions with Mr. Zehetner. “I stopped going out at night, I don’t get manicures or pedicures, I don’t get my hair cut as often,” she said.

Thanks to the coaching, “I know now how to make food work for me,” she said. “I’ve introduced myself to new foods and learned where the hidden calories are,” she added. “I know how to better combine foods, like proteins and carbs. What Brian is teaching me is a lifetime skill, not a quick fix. It’s literally changed my life.”