

# Health & Fitness

Inspiring workouts for body, mind and spirit – tried and tested every week Edited by Fiona McAuslan

## Coach me if you can

Life coaches have been dubbed psychobabbling charlatans and **Simone Baird** was sceptical. But, she says, find the right one and you might start to work out the answers to your problems

Now, generally I'd file life coaches with crystal healing in the folder marked hokum. But, with an unfinished novel that's been on the back burner for a couple of years and vague feelings of being at a dead end career-wise, I'm desperate enough to see if I can be converted.

There are plenty to choose from: estimates by the Association for Coaching put the number of UK life coaches at around 20-40,000 and, as an unregulated industry where anyone can set up shop, it's easy to be suspicious. Questionable techniques like requesting weekly assurances of love from your friends, or throwing your belongings into a skip and creating bereavement sculptures to mitigate a loss do not help the profession's reputation for expensive quackery. Statutory regulation being proposed later this year would mean that psychologists have to be regulated through the Health Professions Council (HPC). The problem is that positive psychology, under the guise of life coaching, will still be able to slip below the regulation radar.

Addressing the situation more positively, it seems to me that a reputable coach can offer help most tangibly to someone overwhelmed by a specific problem. Seeking out some sensible advice and armed with a couple of personal recommendations, I check out the potential talent. The British Psychological Society recommends choosing a coach from one of their members since they must conform to a code of conduct. I choose Karen Skehel; talk of spiritual fulfillment leaves me cold, and it's her businesslike approach with which I feel most comfortable. She comes from a marketing background and is well versed in business personal development – rather than yoga retreats – and has case studies and testimonials as references.

Skehel's the first to admit that it's expensive, with personal clients paying on average £250 per month. The fees include two phone sessions of one hour each, and unlimited in-between sessions to 'share successes, deal with questions or handle urgent interim issues'. Skehel stresses that it's a firmly delineated project: targets are set within a fixed timeframe, in my case six weeks, though between three and six months is common.

We start by identifying the problem areas that cause discomfort and stress: the gap between my 'ideal' life and main

goals. Skehel lists various areas of my life and I grade them out of ten. Hobbies and home life score highly, creativity and work don't. Going over all of the elements of my work, she pulls out a side project I've almost forgotten about but love doing: media workshops with teenagers which sometimes result in the *Time Out Trashed* fanzine. I've always had a vague intention to make it a more regular project but so far have failed to schedule it. She prioritises it as goal number one and gives me homework, producing a breakdown of exactly what the project is, what it could be, and how it could move forward. I also have to produce a 'feelings diary'. To my mind, this is deep touchy feely territory and I'm not happy about it. 'You need to be willing to try new things,' argues Skehel. 'If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got.'

Surprisingly, I have a productive week and when I call we discuss the power of writing things down as opposed to just thinking about them. 'If you want it, write it down,' she says. 'It makes you concentrate on your goals and think about ways to achieve what you want rather than passively wishing it would happen.'

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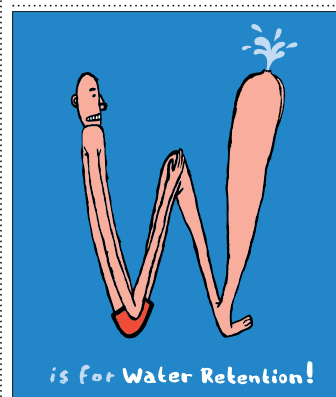
**All talk?** 'Ten laps of this track will get you back on your feet, Baird'

Sadly, the positivity is not to last. The following week I don't lift a finger towards my week's goals. On the phone, I moan that I'm forever making to-do lists and not getting through them because of a combination of finding it hard to say no to unimportant work then procrastinating until the pressure is sky-high. Yet, surprisingly, this proves to be the most illuminating of all the sessions. Despite loving my job, I realise that my to-do lists make it feel like a chore. By the end of the session, I'm looking at things differently: I 'allow' myself to enjoy my job, rather than acting the stropky teen sent to clean a bedroom. Despite sounding supremely daft, it works; I end up finishing all my work assignments in half the time.

It's the final week and we start our last session as we always do: a score out of ten for each of my three main goals. *Time Out Trashed* scores highly as it's moving forwards at a rapid rate. In six short weeks I've managed to hold several workshops and edit the fanzine. I've also accepted that some days I'll feel less positive about things than others. I don't beat myself up about it, though, and that's a big step. Strangely, I realise the sense in what Skehel says and I'm far more inspired to work on my creative writing than ever before.

'The key thing isn't what happens,' says Skehel, 'it's how you feel.' Karen Skehel ([www.wow-coaching.co.uk](http://www.wow-coaching.co.uk)) offers an initial try-out session for £75. For further information, visit the British Psychological Society ([www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)).

## John O'Connell's A-Z of London ailments



I am lying in bed and my abdomen feels very hard, which is odd as I haven't eaten much, only a sandwich.

'I feel bloated,' I say.

'That's because you're premenstrual,' says my wife.

'Oh ha ha,' I say.

'Seriously,' she says. 'You're probably retaining water. Are your ankles swollen too?'

'They are a bit. Now you mention it.'

Now, there are three important things to know about water retention. The first is that it used to be called 'dropsy' but is now referred to as 'edema'. The second is that it is a common killer of aquarium fish. (It's caused by a bacterial infection. Their abdomens bloat and their scales stick out like pine cones.) The third is that the water being retained isn't water as in the purified tap water you pay a pound to drink at Yo! Sushi, but 'interstitial fluid'.

This is the plasma-rich liquid that surrounds our cells. (It also contains salts, fatty acids, coenzymes and amino acids.) Each of us has about 11 litres of it swilling around. Most of the time we're not aware of it; our lymphatic vessels act as a drainage system, and the force of a healthy heartbeat keeps it moving. Which is why old people with poor circulation often have swollen ankles.

At school we had a Latin teacher with swollen legs. He was hunchbacked too, and had bad breath. 'Dennis Dogbreath', we called him, and 'the Elephant Man' – to his face. He bore it all with serene dignity, until the day somebody asked: 'Sir? Why have you got a hump on your back?' The temperature plummeted. He turned to face us, and said slowly: 'That's an extremely rude question. I have no intention of answering it.'

Is this the future for me? To be laughed at by 11-year-olds?

'Probably,' says my wife. 'Now go to sleep.'

John O'Connell's *I Told You I Was Ill* is published by Short Books at £7.99.