

# COACH CLASS

Being diagnosed as HIV+ is not normally seen as a unique opportunity to pursue your dreams, but **Steve Bustin** meets the counsellors who are helping people to believe just that

Life coaching is dismissed by many as a fad, an early “noughties” fashion accessory for the terminally disorganised. The life coach has recently resurfaced, however, in a new and perhaps more important guise, working with those living with HIV.

The nature of HIV treatment has changed dramatically over the last few years. Charities and health bodies have scrambled to keep up with medical advances that have led HIV to be considered by most as a long-term chronic condition, similar to diabetes, rather than a terminal illness. This has seen a move away from hospice care (and the resultant closure of a number of charities) to new approaches to HIV care, focusing on self-management, with life coaching emerging in the last couple of years as one of the best options for many HIV+ people looking to make changes to their situation.

Alison Thompson is a coordinator with Living Well, an NHS-funded programme for people living with HIV that provides life coaches for many of their service users. She says the aim of the programme (normally 12 weekly sessions,

where goals are set and participants are asked to do more than they'd have done by themselves) is to empower HIV+ people and encourage them to remain in control of their lives.

“The people who tend to approach us and enquire about life coaching are often looking to regain some focus and control,” Alison goes on. “They’re people who want to work with someone on a one-to-one basis to address specific actions and challenges, setting exercises that will push them towards their goals. They are often aware of where they want to go, but not sure how to make that happen. They are ready and willing to invest time and energy in themselves.”

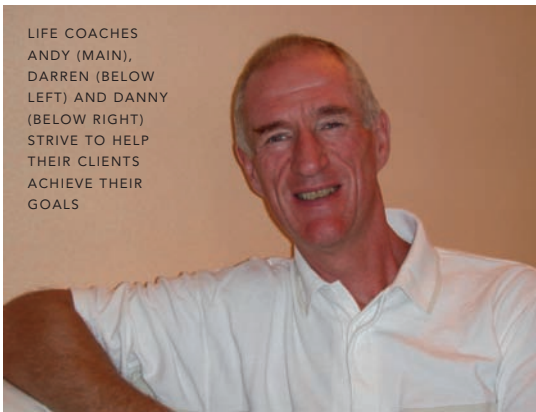
Andy Hilton, who runs a private coaching practice as The HIV Coach, believes coaching can be effective because it looks to the future.

“Life coaching is often associated with those who are highly successful, such as business people,” he says. “But it also fits with people with HIV because it is so forward-looking. A coach starts by asking questions such as, ‘What are your desires and where do you want to be?’ to establish their ‘dream’, but then goes on to look at how they can go about achieving that.

“One has to be careful not to dampen people’s spirits but to be realistic, to come to a place where they’ve accepted where they are now and have a vision of where they want to be, along with a road map in place for how to get there.”

One of the Living Well life coaches, Darren Brady, knows only too well what life coaching can achieve, from his own experience both as a coach and as an HIV+ person.

LIFE COACHES  
ANDY (MAIN),  
DARREN (BELOW  
LEFT) AND DANNY  
(BELOW RIGHT)  
STRIVE TO HELP  
THEIR CLIENTS  
ACHIEVE THEIR  
GOALS



***“I WAS ATTRACTED TO LIFE COACHING BECAUSE IT’S LOOKING AT THE FUTURE AND WHERE PEOPLE WANT TO GET TO. THE CHOICES WE MAKE ARE IMPORTANT”***

“I was attracted to life coaching because it’s looking at the future and where people want to get to,” explains Darren. “I was diagnosed HIV+ two years ago and even at a time of crisis like that, I was able to make a choice about how I responded to that crisis. I saw a poster for Living Well in a clinic waiting room and thought that it was an opportunity I’d like to be involved with. Those choices we make are important.”

Darren says the coaching he undertakes on behalf of Living Well (he also has a private practice) deals with far more than just immediate health-related issues.

“With coaching HIV+ people you might expect it all to be about health, but in fact the coaching is often based around other things. For instance, at the moment I’ve got a lot of people concerned about work, especially following the changes in benefits to people who are HIV+. People are looking at getting back into work, so I may be helping them to start with voluntary or part-time work, then building up to full-time work and developing a career. For other people, the coaching is about forming relationships or changing their home environment.”

Brady believes that the strength of coaching lies in its ability to break seemingly huge tasks down into more manageable ones. It also allows coaches to tackle the underlying issues that may be behind various difficulties, such as returning to work, for example.

“A lot of people with HIV say, ‘I’m HIV’, whereas if we look at people who have cancer, they don’t say, ‘I’m cancer’, they say, ‘I have cancer’. The way some people use language means they become very associated with being

HIV and it becomes who they are rather than something they’ve got; a very difficult standpoint. The victim mentality becomes attached to people who see HIV as their life, so if someone asks why they aren’t working, they say ‘I’m HIV’, when in fact, in the current climate of medication, that doesn’t make sense. Without wanting to generalise, it’s a kind of malaise if you like.

“Our clients fill in questionnaires at the beginning and end of the 12-session coaching programme, so we can see their progress. To the question ‘do you consider yourself to be ill?’ one client said ‘yes’ at the beginning but at the end of just 12 sessions said ‘no’, despite being on the same medication. That’s a huge shift. As a consequence of his coaching, he’s now fulfilling a long-term ambition and going to live in Spain for five months. After living with HIV for some 20 years and doing very little in that time, he’s off to have an adventure.”

Another person who has benefitted from life coaching is Danny West, who was originally diagnosed with HIV in 1985 but, thanks to his coaching (with The HIV Coach, Andy Hilton), is now running his own coaching business.

“Life coaching helped me to enact ideas that up until then had only been thoughts. I moved back to London four years ago and am being treated successfully with combination therapies, so I wanted to go back into training, the sphere I originally worked in. But once I was working with Andy, I developed an interest in becoming a coach myself.

“Coaching is very much about taking action, breaking larger goals down into smaller goals. Having lived with HIV for so long, under a death sentence to all intents and purposes, I suppose I had stopped planning for the future, stopped thinking too far ahead because I never thought I’d live that far. I’ve now achieved things I never dreamed I would achieve, and a lot of that is definitely to do with the coaching I’ve received.

“I’m now a fully qualified coach myself, running my own consultancy, and I still work with Andy – we coach each other now. Coaching helped me with my personal life, relationships and health, as well as helping me set up my business. It allowed me to figure out a way forward.”

## INFORMATION

**Living Well UK:** call 020 8746 2274 or go to [livingwelluk.com](http://livingwelluk.com)

**The HIV Coach:** call 01931 716735 or go to [hivcoach.co.uk](http://hivcoach.co.uk)

**Darren Brady, coach:** call 07921 318053 or go to [darrenbrady.com](http://darrenbrady.com)