



THE NASM GUIDE TO **SELF-GUIDED WELLNESS COACHING**



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Disclaimer

The content in this guide is intended to be used for informational purposes only. It is not to be used to diagnose or treat any medical condition or disease, and not to replace guidance from licensed healthcare provider.

Welcome!

Welcome to the National Academy of Sports Medicine's guide to self-guided wellness coaching. We hope you find the provided framework and strategies empower you to pursue your wellness goals with clarity and direction. Knowing where to start when working on your well-being can be challenging, especially if you feel overwhelmed by all the available options and resources. Using a coaching mindset on your journey is an excellent way to detangle the clutter and create positive momentum.

About NASM

The National Academy of Sports Medicine is the leader in educating and credentialing fitness, wellness, and performance professionals across the globe. NASM provides valid, up-to-date learning content on topics that improve the health and well-being of those they serve. We pride ourselves in creating practical content you can apply right away. Learn more at www.nasm.org, your favorite social media platform, or wherever you listen to podcasts.

Getting the Most from This Guide

This guide will explain some of the why and how behind a wellness coach's mindset. We'll make sense of the information out there, so you won't have to. Then you'll be equipped with actionable steps to apply whenever you like.

Come back and use the information as a reference at any time. Be sure to use the key takeaways and application strategies in ways that make sense. Don't feel obligated to put everything into action right away. When you're ready for a deeper dive, please check out our recommended resources. Most importantly, be patient with yourself and your journey. A little self-compassion goes a long way.



Introduction

When you think about coaching, you might think of the coach of a sports team calling plays or standing on the sidelines and yelling at the referee. Or you might think of someone you know on social media who started coaching within their industry or perhaps a friend who's been working with a coach, but you are not entirely sure what they do. Taking a coach's approach is also useful when working on personal pursuits. It empowers you to work on your relationship with yourself and your goals and grow into the person you aspire to be. This guide outlines the foundational tools of coaching and how to use those tools to coach yourself. Coaching yourself is also a great way to initiate positive change while deciding whether formalized coaching is for you.



What is Coaching?

Within the coaching industry, a coach is a qualified professional who guides and supports others in making positive changes in their own life. A professional coach ensures that the person they're working with has reliable information to base their decisions on and helps shape their client's thinking. Coaching differs from other forms of personal work, such as working with a personal trainer or mentor. While a trainer or mentor will tell their client exactly what to do or change, coaching focuses on the *client's* decision-making and building their capacity to change.

CRITICAL

Unlike careers like law or medicine, coaching is an unregulated field. That means anyone can legally call themselves a coach, regardless of their training, education, or certification. This often means different companies or individuals use the title "coach" for roles that do not use coaching skills. When seeking advice or resources, consider the education and qualified scope of practice of anyone you work with.

How Behavior Change Works

Changing in sustainable ways is a gradual process. Coaching is as much about how someone changes as *what* they change. To coach yourself, you'll want to understand how change works to set yourself up for success.

In our day-to-day lives, habits make up a large part of our behavior. Habits are the routine things we do, often without thinking (e.g., driving to work without remembering the actual drive). Think about a child learning to tie their shoes. Successful shoe tying takes focus and determination the first few times, perhaps even perseverance if the child struggles. However, as adults, most of us can repeat the habit of shoe tying without much thought. The same goes for many of our habits throughout the day.

HELPFUL HINT

Intentional behaviors take a lot of mental focus and energy, whereas habits are automatic and free up cognitive resources. One reason behavior change is hard is it requires the same level of focus, determination, and problem-solving, all of which use costly resources in the brain.

Because of the mental energy required for sustaining change, behavior change research shows when individuals try to change too many things at once, they're less successful with all of them. To solve this problem, focus on the **adjacent possible**. Adjacent possible refers to the positive actions you can take right now, in their current state. Instead of focusing on the kinds of workout, nutrition, or sleep you'd like in an ideal world, you remain focused on what's accessible to you right now and choose behaviors you can consistently change. Through your consistency with that positive change, a new adjacent possible emerges. Over time these positive efforts compound as you move closer and closer to your goals.

Coaching Yourself

When coaching yourself, you'll clarify what you're working on, then focus on making a few doable changes and sustain them until they become a habit. For example, you might decide to "eat better." First, you'll want to clarify what "better" means for you, focusing on the adjacent possible and what's highly doable. You'll seek reliable information about healthy eating, build awareness of your behavior, and use the coaching tools to seek insights on shifting your nutrition. When you find those insights, you'll put them into action through behavior change. You will play the role of both coach and client, finding reliable information, creating opportunities for self-reflection, seeking insight, and finding actions that align with your adjacent possible. Over time your adjacent possible will shift, making new changes accessible, growing your potential for change, and shifting your outcomes.

Mindset

Coaching focuses on the change process as much as the outcomes, making mindset an essential part of coaching yourself. Mindset is the set of beliefs each of us has about how the world works and our role in that world. Mindsets can be very broad, like someone with an optimistic or pessimistic explanatory style, or they can be precise, such as the difference between your mindset about working at a job you dislike and your mindset about your favorite hobby or activity. Fortunately, mindsets are malleable if the individual is open to new experiences and shifts in belief and perspective. One type of mindset is the difference between a growth and a fixed mindset. A **fixed mindset** is based on the idea that success in life or specific endeavors is determined by that individual's natural talents, skills, disposition, and opportunities in life. When a fixed mindset person struggles, they see the struggle as a failure because they don't have the natural talents or opportunities to succeed. People with a fixed mindset tend to give up earlier than those with a **growth mindset**. A growth mindset is based on the belief that learnable skills determine success and that our talents are developed and cultivated by hard work and interest. Therefore, setbacks are learning opportunities, and our success is dictated by consistency and problem-solving more than fixed parameters outside our control. Those with growth mindsets work longer when problem-solving instead of giving up, believing they can find a solution if they learn the right skills or insights.

An individual can have a growth or fixed mindset in a general sense and also different perspectives on different areas of life. For example, you might have a growth mindset at work but a fixed mindset in your closest relationships. Coaching works to develop the outlook of a growth mindset and



support the reframing of problems as opportunities to cultivate solutions and forward progress.

HELPFUL HINT

Language Matters

One way to work on mindset is to focus on the language used to describe a goal or obstacle. Fixed mindset statements are often finite. Examples include "I can't do this," "I'm just bad at math," and "I've never been able to..."

A simple but effective strategy to shift one's mindset from fixed to growth is to change the language used to describe the problem by adding "...yet" to the sentence. Using the earlier examples: "I can't do this yet," "I'm not very good at math yet," and "I haven't been able to do that yet."

These examples sound simple, but creating the space for "...yet" is enough of a reflection to create insight and change. It establishes the proper distance between you and a fixed-mindset statement and leaves room for the adjacent possible.

Goal Setting

A critical step in any coaching journey is setting effective goals. Proper goal setting can help you find clarity, purpose, and growth. When you set goals that align with your authentic self, you're more likely to pursue them, work through obstacles, and have a greater sense of well-being when you achieve them. These kinds of goals are known as **self-concordant goals**.

The Journey or The Destination?

Some goals are objective, meaning there's a straightforward way to measure success. Financial goals, running a race, or lowering blood pressure are all examples because they can be planned for and have measurable success. You have either run the race or not. Other goals are subjective, representing your experience of yourself and your life. Examples include your satisfaction with your life, your sense of overall well-being, or the quality of your relationships, including your relationship with yourself.



Another way to think about different goals is process versus outcomes goals. Many goals focus on outcomes, like the objective outcomes described above; however, coaching also focuses on experiential and growth processes. Process goals are those that focus on the qualitative elements of a process. Examples include approaching struggles with self-compassion, being curious about your resistance to change, or being open-minded to what you can learn about yourself.

Working with Subjective or Process Goals

Subjective and process goals rely on the individual to gauge their progress, but that gauge can be simple. For example, if your process goal was to meet challenges with more of a growth mindset, consider your most recent challenge and gauge your growth mindset on a scale from 1 to 10. In this example, you might self-assess at a 4. A few weeks later, you self-assess and feel you've been meeting your challenges with a 6, representing your subjective improvement. Because it is your internal process and self-selected goal, it doesn't matter that the gauge is subjective, too.

Working with Objective or Outcome Goals

Because of their objective nature, many people are more comfortable with objective and outcome-based goal setting. Objective goals are structured in their nature, with specific outcomes and variables that can be manipulated with the right conditions. An objective or outcome goal could be saving \$10,000 for a new home. With that objective in mind, you can shift your spending and saving habits and work towards the goal.

PRACTICE THIS

Time to set some goals!

Using the tools from this section, identify a few goals that resonate with your future self:

- Outcome-based goals with straightforward ways to measure success.
- Process goals focus on the "how" and gauge progress subjectively.

Remember to focus on a few things you feel strongly about and align with your authentic future self.

Gathering Reliable Information

One role of a coach is to ensure their clients have accurate information relevant to their goals. This is why many coaches have a niche or a specific area of specialty where they use not only the skills of coaching but also their expertise in that given area. When coaching yourself, you'll want to gather accurate information to be sure your action plan supports sustainable change. Ethical coaches use high-quality sources of information and base their guidance on peer-reviewed research. **Figure 1** below provides essential guidance on separating well-supported information from questionable claims.

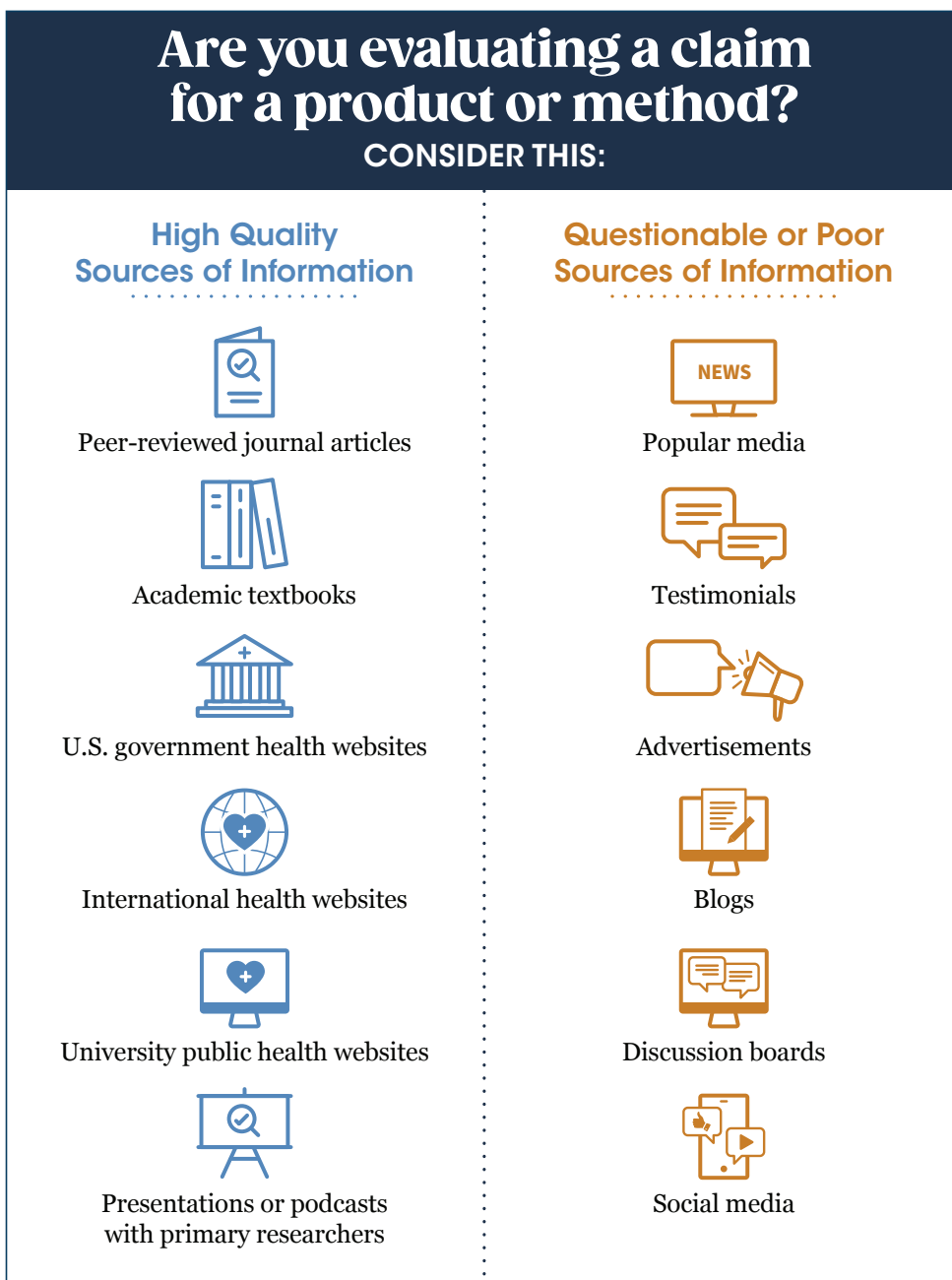


Figure 1. Separating Valid from Questionable Information

Making an Action Plan

Setting both outcome and process goals is normal, often complementing one another. Once your goals are set, and you've gathered supporting information, it's time to make a change. An action plan is your roadmap to sustainable change, starting from where you are and outlining your next steps.

Ready, Willing, and Able to Change

Regardless of the type of goals, successful behavior change will focus on what you're ready, willing, and able to change. **Ready** means choosing something to change right now or within the next few days. For example, parents of newborns are not likely ready to work on their sleep but may be prepared to work on other aspects of their well-being. **Willing** refers to your willingness to shift that aspect of your life. You may not be willing to leave your partner to make changing your nutrition easier, but you may be willing to change who's responsible for cooking and planning meals. **Able** to change means the variables that affect that aspect of your life are

under your control currently. An adolescent may not be empowered to shift mealtimes in their parent's house, or someone on a limited budget may not be able to afford a gym membership at this time. By focusing on what is within your control, you can shift the adjacent possible as circumstances change.

You'll want your behavior change statements to be clear and detailed, just like objective goals. By being clear with your "what by when," you can make a better action plan and are more likely to stick to it.

PRACTICE THIS

Choosing Behaviors to Change

From your goals, identify what behaviors you're ready, willing, and able to change. Get specific about the behavior. The more specific you are about what you'll be doing and changing, the more precise your action plan can be.

Then, for each behavior, you can assess if you're ready, willing, and able to change it. On a scale of 1 – 10, ask yourself how confident you are that you'll succeed with that change. If it's less than a 9, make the change smaller. Your goal is not to choose an optimized, shiny, and perfect behavior. Instead, it is to optimize your chances for success and the achievability of the behavior.

Goal Monitoring

As you continue working towards your goal, choose a way to gauge your progress. When working with a coach, you would have regular check-ins, which you can still do when coaching yourself. You might set up regular intervals for self-check-ins or use a habit-tracking app or a journal. You'll have selected a clear measurable for objective and outcome goals, and with process goals, you have a subjective gauge.

Remember to embrace a growth mindset when you've fallen short of your goals. Look for clues as to why you missed your initial targets, then adjust the plan and try again. A few questions that can be helpful when you're struggling include:

- Is there a pattern of behavior or another obstacle that got in the way?
- Is there a thought or belief that shifted your thinking when you tried to execute your action plan?
- Thinking of your goal and the version of yourself that is successful with that goal, how would that future self like to have handled this situation? Are there other ways you handled it in the past? Are there other options than how you've handled it this time?
- How would you like to handle that obstacle next time?

A critical aspect of coaching is how setbacks are met with curiosity instead of rejection, shame, or guilt. Obstacles and struggles are used to promote growth using inquiry instead of shutting down.



Working with Self Talk

One type of unhelpful belief can be negative self-talk. **Self-talk** is what you say, in your mind or aloud, about yourself to yourself. These can range from the pleasant, "I look nice in this outfit," to the benign, "I could have handled that better," to the actively negative and judgmental, "I am so stupid and will never amount to anything." Many struggle with self-talk and find it limits their potential for positive change.

Identifying self-talk starts with mindfulness and the awareness that you are not your thoughts. For those struggling to identify their self-talk, a coach, therapist, or trusted friend can be helpful. Negative self-talk limits positive change and can be detrimental to mental health. When coaching yourself, you'll want to meet negative self-talk with self-compassion. According to

Dr. Kristin Neff, self-compassion has three factors you can work with to cultivate it:

- **Self-kindness over self-judgment:** consider responding to your own struggles and suffering with the same kindness you'd extend to someone you love and care for.
- **Common humanity over isolation:** it's easy to feel ashamed, especially when our self-talk is negative. Shame can cause us to isolate and shut down. However, all people struggle sometimes, and we can confide in others who understand our suffering.
- **Mindfulness instead of over-identification:** when we struggle and suffer, it can be easy to tell ourselves we are bad. Mindfulness allows us to draw a boundary between identity and behavior, reinforcing that all people make mistakes and struggle is part of growth.

CHECK IT OUT

The online resources provided later include some of Dr. Neff's recommended self-compassion practices and exercises.

Consider meeting negative self-talk with affirmations. Affirmations are short phrases that can be repeated to yourself to refocus your thinking. However, not all affirmations are effective for everyone. Research shows that for affirmations to shift your self-talk, mindset, or beliefs successfully, you have to believe the affirmation is true. For example, if someone that does not like their body uses the affirmation "I love my body" but does so inauthentically, the resulting cognitive dissonance will lower their well-being and efficacy. If, instead, that same person uses the affirmation "I love parts of my body, and that's okay," they are more likely to see a positive effect.

Reframing Behaviors and Beliefs

Reframing is a psychological strategy used in counseling and coaching where you intentionally look at a given situation with different interpretations. Considering alternate causes and explanations empowers you to challenge your default thinking and change your beliefs and patterns. Some thoughts, patterns, and beliefs aren't helpful (or possibly untrue altogether) and may limit or prevent progress toward your goals. As part of your work, you may identify such thoughts, patterns, and beliefs but feel stuck in how to move through them. Reframing is one way to consider more helpful alternatives.

Examples of unhelpful thoughts might include:

- All-or-nothing thinking – seeing situations as needing to be one way or the other without considering possible alternatives.
- Assuming the worst outcome – a habit of believing negative outcomes are inevitable, which can be defeating before you've tried to change and limit what you're willing to try.
- Negative-focused thinking (ignoring positive events, people, and influences) – human beings have a negativity bias, a mental habit of focusing on negative things more than positive ones. This has been shown to limit well-being and life satisfaction when it is one's dominant way of thinking.
- Believing you are bad or wrong and that is the cause of the problem – the resulting shame can limit your ability to make positive changes due to feelings of unworthiness or inadequacy.

Reframing works by helping you examine these unhelpful thoughts, practice finding alternative viewpoints, identify what can be helpful, and put it into practice.

PRACTICE THIS**Are you feeling stuck? Try reframing.**

Here's a step-by-step process for you to try reframing yourself:

1. Identify the unhelpful belief, thought, or pattern limiting your progress.
2. Examine the unhelpful thought, belief, or pattern. Ask yourself questions to help understand how you came to that belief or thought or how the pattern got started. Ask yourself what this thought, pattern, or belief means to you and your life.
3. Come up with some alternative beliefs. What might be a more helpful belief or thought in this situation or pattern? Choose the version that is the most helpful, authentic, and accessible to you now.
4. Consider how this new belief would shift your behavior. Ask yourself, "What would it mean if <this new belief> is true?"
5. What is the thought or behavior that can help you catch when the unhelpful pattern is happening so you can intervene and choose another path in the future?
6. Put it into practice. What concrete, doable actions would represent a shift in this thought, belief, or pattern (and ultimately create a new one)?

The change in belief and behavior will take some practice and reinforcement. Remember to embrace a growth mindset, even about using reframing and other coaching techniques.

Summary

Coaching is not a linear process, so it can be challenging to lay out how to coach yourself in clear, linear steps. However, here's a general framework for how to get started:

1. Determine what you want and set goals that align with your authentic self.
2. Create emotional buy-in and authenticity by identifying the positive outcomes associated with being successful at your goals.
3. Gather information from reliable sources to support sound decision-making.
4. Identify behaviors you are ready, willing, and able to change.
5. Action plan your next steps and identify any potential obstacles.
6. Execute your plan!
7. Don't get down on yourself if you get stuck! This is natural. Troubleshoot or try techniques like reframing when this happens.

Finding Support

Everyone needs help sometimes. You may find you can successfully coach yourself but eventually get stuck or feel that progress has stalled. This can be a great time to seek out a coach whose niche aligns with your goals and experiences. There are other times you may want to seek out support, such as when working towards your goals prompts a negative or difficult emotional reaction like shame or guilt. It's also possible that you may struggle with your mental health while working on your beliefs and thoughts. Therapy can be a beneficial process that aligns well with your coaching goals.

Resources

When you're in a pinch for time but want to revisit this self-coaching framework, **Figure 2** offers a quick reference guide.

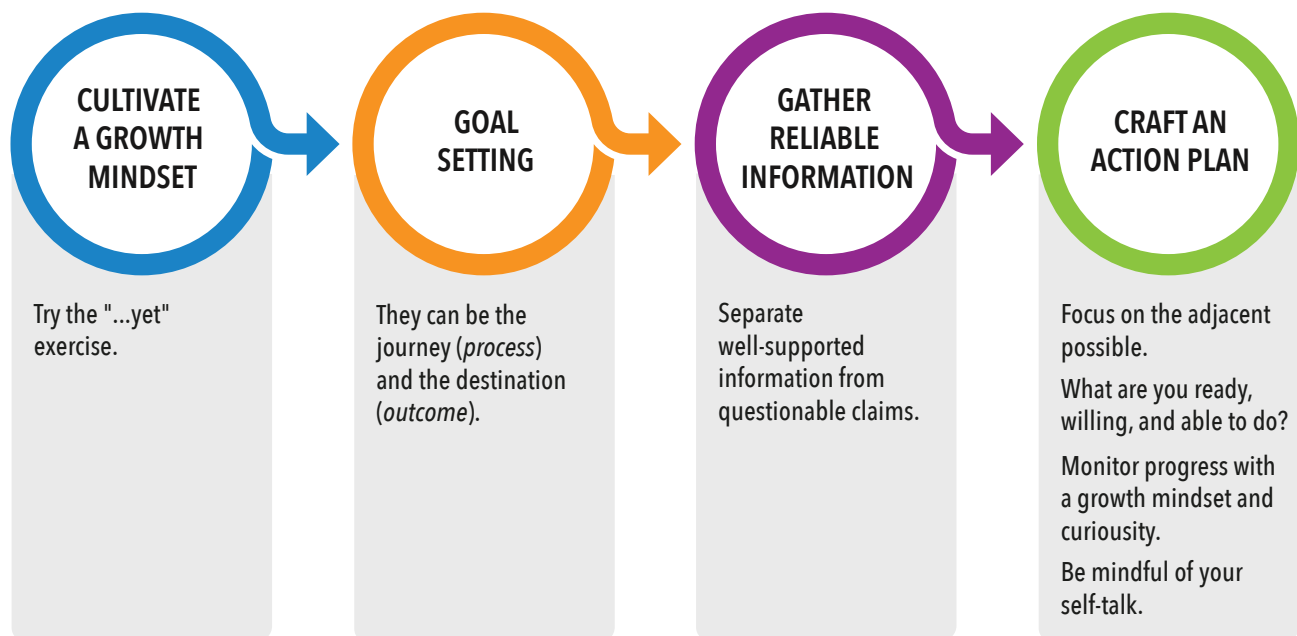


Figure 2. Self-Coaching Framework

Community Organizations

Here are some additional resources that can help you on your coaching and wellness journey:

- Cooperative Extension – The Cooperative Extension System is a US national education network providing free, low-cost community services. Some universities also have Cooperative Extensions and often teach nutrition, gardening, and other helpful life skills.
- Hospital Wellness Programs – Larger hospital systems have preventative health programs where you can learn about exercise, nutrition, and other aspects of health and wellness.
- Other local programs – Many communities have non-profit organizations providing food, workshops, low-cost meals, community garden plots, and more. Think outside the box about connecting with these organizations for your learning or service.

Wellness and Fitness Professionals

Qualified wellness and fitness professionals can accelerate your change process by providing reliable information, accountability, and support. When thinking about working with a professional, here are a few things to consider:

- Qualifications – Verify the professional you’re considering working with has been certified by a credible organization. Not only does that show they have current and accurate knowledge, but it’s a sign that someone is a professional in their field and is more likely to support you consistently. The achievement of a credential also displays a coach’s commitment to their craft. They have taken the time, effort, and dedicated resources to their education and qualifications.
- Professionalism – Unlike working a typical 9 to 5, fitness and wellness are service industries. Professionals equipped to support you towards your goals will have ethical business practices, be on time for your appointments, and act appropriately with their clients.
- Match Your Niche – Many coaches and trainers specialize in particular goals, challenges, or groups of people. Find a professional with a track record of supporting people like you in gaining similar outcomes to what you’re seeking. You wouldn’t hire a baker who specializes in pies to create your wedding cake (unless you want a pie, of course); you’ll want the right professional for your goals.

Online Resources

Here are a few places to find reliable information about coaching, the domains of wellness, and behavior change:

- Better Than Fine Podcast – wherever you listen to podcasts or visit this [YouTube playlist](#)
- [NASM Blog](#)
- [Dr. Kristin Neff’s Self-Compassion Practices and Exercises](#)

About the Author

Darlene Marshall is a Holistic Wellness Coach and an expert in the intersection of fitness, wellness, and well-being. In 2021 Darlene was named America's Favorite Trainer by BurnAlong, and she hosts the Better Than Fine podcast on the NASM Podcast Network. She's a NASM-certified Wellness Coach and Personal Trainer with a master's in Applied Positive Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. She has additional certifications in Nutrition Coaching, Neurolinguistic Programming, 200hr YTT in Alignment Yoga, and training in sleep coaching, motivational interviewing, meditation, and mindfulness. You can find her on Instagram [@darlene.coach](https://www.instagram.com/darlene.coach) and her substack at [BetterThanFine.substack.com](https://www.betterthanfine.substack.com).



**THANKS FOR
READING!**

