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## Mothers Find a Helping Hand in Sobriety Coaches

By MARISA FOX JULY 11, 2014



Patty Powers, a recovery coach and a former addict, listening to a client in Central Park. Some clients require that she identify herself as something else. “My mom clients are the most terrified of being found out,” she said. Credit Jennifer S. Altman for The New York Times

Tamara Mellon, a founder of Jimmy Choo shoes and mother of Minty, 12, was sitting on a cream leather sofa in her airy Madison Avenue office, recounting her arduous climb from hard-partying cocaine addict to fashion goddess.

“You get over one thing and you get slammed with something else,” said Ms. Mellon, 47, looking slinky in a crisp white blazer, a high-slit skirt and gladiator sandals. She recalled some of the ordeals: her father’s death, two hostile takeover attempts, taking her mother to court. “It’s a miracle I’m still here,” she said.

Her secret to staying sober through it all? Ms. Mellon enlisted the aid of a recovery coach, Martin Freeman, a London-based psychotherapist.

“He’s the most enduring relationship I’ve had,” said Ms. Mellon, who keeps her sobriety coach on a retainer to ensure he will be there for morning chat sessions and late-night calls and to accompany her to stressful events. “I’m his one and only.”

Once consigned to Hollywood entourages to keep celebrities on the straight and narrow (and out of rehab), sobriety coaches, also known as sober companions and recovery therapists, are being hired by well-heeled mothers from the Upper East Side to the beachfront homes of Boca Raton, Fla.

Tamara Mellon enlisted a London-based psychotherapist to be her sobriety coach. Credit Ben Gabbe/Getty Images

Blame the rigors of being an urban mother. “Raising kids is stressful to begin with,” said Mary Karr, the best-selling writer who lives in Greenwich Village, who related her grueling recovery in her 2009 memoir “[Lit: A Memoir](#).” “The new supermoms have to be thin and rich and successful, so there’s all this extra stress,” she said. “It’s loathsome.”

“Addiction is a disease of isolation,” added Ms. Karr, 59, who has a 28-year-old son (she starts “Lit” with an open letter to him). “I would have loved to have someone come over and help me not get drunk.”

It’s not just the extra glasses of pinot or rosé. Cosmopolitan mothers these days are also reaching for Adderall (the multitasker’s best friend), Percocet (the antidote to the taxing trifecta of marriage, children and career) and Ambien (that bedtime staple), not to mention a cocktail of other drugs that high-strung mothers also have at their disposal.

And by the time these mothers realize they need help, they don’t exactly have the time or wherewithal to check into rehab or attend 12-step meetings. In addition, they want more privacy, the better to avoid the judgment and stigma that mothers with addiction face.

“Can you think of a greater taboo?” said Nanette Zumwalt, the president of [Hired Power](#), a recovery agency in Huntington Beach, Calif., that works with many mothers. “Addiction is still viewed as a character defect,” she said. “There’s far greater stigma among women, particularly mothers.”

Discretion “more anonymous than A.A.” is one of the reasons Jeanne, a 42-year-old vice president at a Fortune 500 company in New York, hired a sobriety coach this year for her drinking. (Like several mothers interviewed for this article, she requested that only her middle name be used to protect her family’s privacy.)

Jeanne, a remarried mother who shares custody of her 11-year-old daughter with her ex-husband, said that she never slurred her words at cocktail parties or got pulled over for drunken driving. But on a recent family vacation, she heard the words she dreaded most: “Mom, you’re drinking too much.”

“I was my daughter’s age when my dad came out as an alcoholic,” said Jeanne, a marketing executive, who spent her youth going to [Alateen](#), an offshoot of A.A. meetings for teenage family members. “I never thought that would be me,” she said. Rehab was not a viable option. “What working mom can be away for 30 to 60 days?” she added. “And how would I explain it?”

So she hired [Natasha Silver Bell](#), 38, a sobriety coach on the Upper East Side, who is a divorced mother and former addict. Jeanne has been seeing Ms. Silver Bell once a week for the last four months, paying roughly \$200 for an hour sit-down session, which also grants calling or texting privileges. “I liked that I could do it without disrupting my schedule,” Jeanne said.

Since she started seeing Ms. Silver Bell, Jeanne said she has not had a drink in months, feels more clearheaded and energized, and she does not fall asleep when reading bedtime stories with her daughter.

Some mothers integrate their sobriety coaches into their social lives, bringing them to parties, brunches and the gym. “I’m the new Pilates instructor,” said [Patty Powers](#), a recovery coach from the East Village, offering a cover story she tells her client’s friends. “My mom clients are the most terrified of being found out,” she said. “If someone wants to pass me off as their trainer, I go with it.”

Ms. Powers, 53, a former heroin addict, was an art director at Area, a prominent nightclub in New York during the 1980s, before moving to Los Angeles to get clean. She joined Narcotics Anonymous, where she became a sponsor to help fellow addicts through the program. These days, when she’s not on a tour bus with a rock-star client or on a film set with an actor, Ms. Powers rides her bike from Wall Street to Carnegie Hill, where she weans mothers from Vicodin or Klonopin.

“They’re starved for companionship,” Ms. Powers said. “Today’s pill-popping moms are a far cry from the bored, suburban housewives of ‘The Valley of the Dolls.’ They’re taking opioids, which are dangerously addictive. If you’re trying to withdraw from OxyContin, a doctor might prescribe Suboxone, which is even harder to kick than heroin.”

## Recent Comments

### Dixie Harris

4 days ago

Yes yes. How "challenging" your life is, what with the kids, the stressful job, the isolation. Now do it without the money. That's 99% of...

I agree: Whatever works, whatever it takes, great. But why is this article in the Fashion & Style section? That says more about the Times...

I believe there are paths to sobriety other than AA. This comment is not to debate that. But the desire, need, will, wake-up call, whatever...

Just ask Alix, 44, a grade-school teacher and mother of three who lives in Boca Raton, Fla. She was given Percocet for her first cesarean section 12 years ago. “I never felt anything like that before,” she said. Enabled by her husband, a prominent doctor, she was up to 10 OxyContin pills a day before long. When she wanted to go to rehab, she said her husband refused to let her go, fearing his colleagues would find out.

Alix tried detoxing at a hospital clinic, but the doctor there replaced one prescription with two others: Xanax and Suboxone. She saw Ms. Powers on “[Relapse](#),” the A&E reality series about

drug addicts, and after trying to find another sobriety coach, she called the show's producers to get in touch with her. Ms. Powers checked Alix into a hotel in Delray Beach, Fla., for a **monthlong "wellness" stay.**

"Not even my closest friends knew," Alix said. "I said that Patty was my life coach-slash-nutritionist. She was with me 24/7." Last summer, Alix celebrated her first sober anniversary and no longer checks in with Ms. Powers.

Some sobriety coaches become so interwoven with their clients that they end up living at their homes. When Deborah Magaldi, 56, a mother of three who runs a marketing company in Seal Beach, Calif., was finishing her third stint in rehab for addiction to alcohol and Vicodin, she hired a live-in sober companion.

"I found it hard to function in the real world in a sober capacity without the protective cocoon of a rehab," Ms. Magaldi said. "It's like reading a book on how to swim, and then jumping into the ocean. Having a companion with me at all times allowed me to transition, so I didn't drown."

For three months, her sobriety coach slept in a spare bedroom and got Ms. Magaldi to work out, to go to meetings and even traveled with her as needed. "My first night alone was scary," she said. "My husband was away on business, as he usually was. But she taught me to write my feelings down and think things through instead of heading down the path of destructive impulses to quiet down the white noise in my head."

The experience inspired Ms. Magaldi to start *Hired Power* to help other addicts. "I had been on chemicals for more than 30 years," she said. "It takes a while for the brain to normalize."

For mothers like Ms. Magaldi, sobriety coaches offer more than someone to keep them from relapsing, but companionship at a time when they are at their most vulnerable.

Back at her office, Ms. Mellon reflected on how her recovery therapist, Mr. Freeman, had given her the strength to soldier on. Her towering up and downs, which she chronicled in her 2013 memoir, "In My Shoes," had included a stint in rehab, a fairy tale wedding, a nasty divorce and her work building a fashion juggernaut and then seeing it all go.

"It's not the actual substance that defines addiction, it's the feelings underneath," she said. "It's amazing the ability to move on once you are healthy and not stuck in the past. Martin definitely helped me get on with my life and start again."