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HELP IS AT HAND



Nancy Benamor (right) keeps Andrea Yampolsky, creator of My Concierge+, on speed-dial for help on the home front.

Catching up with Nancy Benamor is not an easy thing to do. Benamor owns an IT consulting business and works 80-hour weeks, travelling extensively for business. “Voice mails and emails follow you everywhere,” Benamor says. “We are overburdened with everything these days.”

On a long-overdue trip to the hairdresser’s chair, she expressed a desperate but unlikely wish: “If I could pay someone else to get my hair done, I would.”

No one has found a way to do that, but there are a widening number of time-saving services aimed at harried people with punishing work schedules and frazzled parents who can't squeeze another errand into 24 hours.

Most people have heard of personal trainers or massage therapists who will come to your home, or the dog walkers and personal chefs who can help you manage your hectic schedule.

Their names are traded in gym locker rooms, boardrooms and school carpool circles.

But for anyone who can't face the prospect of shopping for another birthday gift, keeping track of their tax receipts all year or making every single lunchbox for their kids, there is help for that, too.

Benamor uses Andrea Yampolsky of My Concierge+ to fetch her groceries and handle her dry-cleaning. She's had Yampolsky look for a mirror to put in her powder room, find her a cleaning lady, and even bring over medicine when Benamor ended up sick in bed.

"I work crazy hours and I'm often out of time," explains Benamor, who is single. Sometimes she'd run out late at night to a 24-hour supermarket to get what she needed to prepare Shabbat dinner for relatives the next day.

"On a Saturday afternoon, the last thing I want to do is go to Wal-Mart with 3,000 other people and their screaming kids. When I actually have some free time, I want to use it for myself."

Benamor has been using the service for several years, and can't imagine living without it. "It's totally liberating. When I come home from work and it's been a long week, it's such a pleasure to open the fridge and find food in there."

Nancy Boyle extends affordable luxuries to her dog. The hard-working lawyer has a two-year-old black Labrador and a work schedule that often takes her out of town for two or three days at a time. "But it's also pretty important to me to have a dog in my life."

Boyle was searching for a dogsitter when she met Laura Clarke, a wellness consultant and practitioner of what she calls "doggisage," a combination of relaxation and healing techniques for dogs. When the dog, Tusker, was hit by a car and broke his back in August, Boyle was just about to go on vacation. But she knew who to call.

Clarke went to visit Tusker at the vet after his operation. "And since then she's been coming to my house for an hour every day, Monday to Friday, to visit him for massage and Reiki."

"It calms him right down when she comes in," Boyle says. "For dogs that have been sick or injured, massage helps them make more red blood cells and purify their organs," Clarke says. "It also calms their nervous systems so they can heal faster."

The "doggisage" massage service costs \$35 an hour.

“I don’t have kids, and my boyfriend calls me a worrywart,” Boyle laughs. “But it gives me a lot of peace of mind and comfort to know (Clarke) is someone I can rely on.”

Clarke also offers doggie daycare, dogwalking, pet sitting, pet taxis, holistic and natural pet-care workshops in the newly expanded facilities of O My Dog! Holistic Care for Dogs and their People (scheduled to open on Notre Dame St. in St. Henri in late October). Fees range from \$10 for basic community pet-care workshops to \$35 for overnight dog sitting.

Clarke’s belief in alternative veterinary care has been reinforced by scares over pet and human food produced in China.

“I’ve gone completely organic myself, and I stopped putting unnatural things in my system. I thought ‘Why am I not doing this for my pets?’ So I took away their flea collars and I started cooking for them. Who knew cats liked cantaloupe and peas? The animals are healthier, and in the long run it saves money.”

Clarke also arranges grooming and vet appointments, and can even have the animals chauffeured to and from. Pet taxis can also be arranged for dogsitting and doggy daycare services (avail-

Most of Yampolsky’s clients have her buy groceries and household products; she also offers them advice on basic home and office decor, she shops for kids’ clothes, presents for birthday parties, secretaries and other names on the Christmas or Hanukkah shopping list. She will have your car washed, your closet edited and organized to meet fashion standards and even teach your housekeeper how to cook a few decent meals.

“The more relaxed I am and the less cluttered my life is, the better I am at work,” Benamor says. “There is no price for my peace mind.”

She laughs: “Now all I need is for (Yampolsky) to find me a man!”

Yampolsky’s new clients often tell her, “I feel terrible I even have to call you to do this!”

She says: “They are so guilt-ridden. I don’t understand it. You can have me go to (the grocery store) so you don’t have to spend two hours there yourself after a long day at work. Go spend the time at the pool with your kids. Help them with their homework. Go to the gym.”

Yampolsky charges \$30 an hour: “This isn’t just for the highest of the high. It’s what I call an affordable luxury.” (7 a.m. to 7 p.m.).

“For many people, their dog is like a replacement spouse or like a kid. One client, a mother of three, told me she thinks of her dog as her first-born child,” Clarke says. “(Your dog) is the only being who wants only to please you and make you happy. They love you unconditionally, warts and all.” Getting organized

For other people, the little bit of luxury they are looking for is help getting their lives in order. Jamie Smith felt he needed to bring in a professional organizer for his desk when he found

himself hiding it from friends dropping by. The Air Canada flight attendant and part-time student says he looked at the mess and thought “This does not look like the desk of a (future) life coach.”

He called Susan Portnoy of Organized Success, who sent over professional organizer Nathalie Rivard. “She completely organized my desk and gave me a workable system. I have a ‘to read’ file now! I never had that before.”

“The difference between a cleaning lady and an organizer is that the cleaning lady will just clean up the piles,” Portnoy says. “But we will put together a system that lets people move forward. The idea is to live a more productive and less stressful life.”

Portnoy says the worst problem most people have is dealing with the non-stop flow of paper – artwork and schoolwork kids bring home, flyers and bills. The second worst is closets.

“People don’t like to give things away. They think I might lose weight, or it might come back into style. But, really, we use only 20 per cent of what we own 80 per cent of the time. It’s my job to go in there and know what people aren’t using.”

Few people are more aware than Elaine Lang of the serious consequences of letting important papers pile up. Her specialty is financial organization, and Lang, who works both independently and as part of Portnoy’s team, has seen too many people overwhelmed by the information they need to track their expenses, banking and investments. “People hire me because they are spending more than they can afford,” she says. “They find themselves in debt.”

Lang assesses their needs and helps them put a system in place to keep track of all these things, and, most importantly, to budget. “I show them how to stay out of debt.”

Her clients fall at both ends of the income spectrum. She can teach the basics of online banking, budget preparations and give tips for saving money. For people in debt, she can help negotiate payment plans with credit card or banking companies.

“Sometimes I have to cut up their credit cards, and they will only use a pre-paid credit card so they can control themselves,” she says. “Sometimes I will make people sell their cars or their homes. “I will teach you to live the way you can afford.” She offers the service to companies as well.

She will also help people find the best plans for banking, cellphone, Internet and telephone expenses. Clients looking to save on these kinds of plans are guaranteed a savings – if she can’t trim at least her hourly fee of \$75 off their bills, she asks them to pay only her what she does save. No more messy kitchens

What if you feel besieged not so much by errands or piles of papers, but by the endless series of meals your family eats? Novice or nervous cooks have more help than ever.

Shawna Goodman Sone, professional chef, cooking teacher and mom of three young boys, has unveiled a kitchen organization package for people desperate to get themselves cooking but not sure where to begin.

“ We all know what it’s like to get to the end of the day, look around and feel completely overwhelmed at the thought of making dinner,” she laughs. “ I will give order to the chaos.”

Sone, who teaches cooking classes (in English) at west-end Loblaw’s grocery stores, says kitchens need to be well-organized, have the right tools and a wellstocked pantry. She sets out to make even the most modest kitchen cookingfriendly in an affordable way.

“With a dollar store at hand, you can stock a kitchen with the basic tools for \$20,” she says. “And having the right ingredients on hand helps, like pasta, canned beans, sundried tomatoes and herbs and spices.”

Sone can help novice cooks plan basic recipes that suit their tastes, draw up a shopping list and teach them a few basic techniques. “I’m not going to teach them how to make Chicken Cordon Bleu if all they want is homemade mac and cheese. Once I teach you how to make one soup, you’ll be able to make 10 soups.”

And what about the uninterested or frustrated cook? Parents who have had it with preparing lunches for their kids to throw out at school can now leave the crust-trimming to someone else.

Kid Lunch opened one year ago by sisters Sue and Michéle Maheu, each a mom of two school-aged daughters. Parents can log onto www.kidlunch.ca to put together a menu for their kids. They choose from homemade and nutritionally sound options, many of which are organic. They can choose one or more lunches a week, or make it a once-in-awhile treat when Mom or Dad gets particularly busy.

The lunches are delivered to west-end schools by 11:30 a.m. “I hated making lunches, and I know other parents feel the same way,” Sue Maheu says. “I saw this idea on a Dutch website and I thought, ‘This is brilliant!’”

The menu was designed by a nutritionist and approved by the Lester B. Pearson School Board. Parents of kids in other west-end schools can use the service, too, though Maheu and her sister clear delivery to a new school with each principal.