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Lasting Lifestyle Change Through Wellness Coaching

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Lasting lifestyle change is the elusive goal of every wellness program, whether individual, group or organization-wide. Prescriptions alone don't work. Diets alone don't work. New Year's resolutions alone don't work. Information alone doesn't work. The key word is alone.

Enter an ally, a professional ally...a coach. Having someone who will stand with you and stand by you as you take on the challenge of a significant lifestyle change can make all the difference. Coaching is "a powerful alliance designed to forward and enhance the lifelong process of human learning, effectiveness, and fulfillment" according to the Coaches Training Institute. Focus the skills of coaching on wellness goals and the dynamic results can be impressive.

Wellness programs can benefit from the concept of coaching and wellness coaching in at least two ways. Professionally trained coaches can be hired or used as resources to coach program participants through the process of healthy lifestyle change. Programs can also benefit by having their staffs receive training to become more “coach-like” in the way that they work with participants (clients).

In the article “Coaching for Wellness” (Arloski, 1999), the field of professional coaching is described and its connections with wellness explored. A case study illustrates how wellness coaching can be of value to both wellness professionals and clients.

Professional coaches can be of tremendous help to clients seeking lasting behavioral change in their lifestyles. The change process always involves overcoming the power of long-standing health habits (Arloski, 2002). The ongoing support and accountability of a coaching relationship can help the client through the transition from old habits to new healthy lifestyle habits. Alone, the client frequently becomes discouraged upon the re-emergence of the old habit, and thinking they have insufficient strength of character, too often quits. We see this every March as the three-month New Year’s Resolution fitness center memberships are not renewed.

Coaches also can be of real value with helping the client engage in and commit to a wellness plan that will have a greater probability of success. The wellness coach may do this, in part, through the use of a wellness evaluation tool. TestWell and The Wellness Inventory are two excellent examples of online wellness tools that can help clients get a good picture of their current level of wellness. These instruments also help begin the process of selecting goals and areas of wellness where the change process should be focused. Interpretation sessions and frequent

reference to the results of the tool can help catalyze the wellness coaching sessions.

Many wellness professionals are already functioning in roles that are very “coach-like” in nature. Helping participants in wellness programs to learn more about themselves and engage in a change-for-the-better process often involves working closely with groups and individuals. This is where coaching skills can be of real value.

Specific Skills

Accountability, creating agreements of commitment to action, asking powerful questions, multi-level listening, sustaining motivation for change, goal setting, using acknowledgements, developing balance and fulfillment are only some of the skills to be learned from coaching. Let's focus on just one of the many coaching skills that will be especially important in working with wellness clients—sustaining motivation.

Sustaining Motivation

Nothing works better than internal motivation. A good athletic coach knows this and through their relationship with the player, discovers what motivates that particular individual. Rather than just being a cheerleader on the sidelines, the wellness professional needs to be “in the game” with the client and develop a trusting relationship that is a true alliance. From that sense of trust, issues of self-esteem that are critical to lifestyle change can be explored (Arloski 1994).

Coaches have many strategies and techniques at their disposal which wellness professionals can use, too. “Structures” are one of these. Structures are physical objects that remind a client of a wellness goal. The structure can be quite direct and obvious, like

a photograph of a mountainous vacation destination that the client wants to be in good enough condition to thoroughly enjoy. Or, the structure can be symbolic and have a unique meaning that only the client (and wellness professional or coach) knows about. A little statuette of a playful-looking gnome on one's desk might be a continual reminder to lighten up and be more fun-loving even at work.

As we adapt to our environments constantly, structures fade into the background of our awareness. To prevent this from occurring, move structures to new locations, or change them. Freshen up the photos around your desk that motivate you.

The Alliance

When wellness professionals become more “coach-like,” they no longer just enroll, inform and educate their clients, they take the journey with them, by their sides. They accompany the client as their professional ally.

Coaching skills are focused on the here and now, on both understanding and taking action, on both support and accountability. Forging such skills into the repertoire of the wellness professional makes them into a more effective change agent and an ally that clients will value on their own path to wellness.

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