

## Healthy Mindset, Healthy Body

by Julie Chiu, RN, MS, CHC, IC

In many ways health coaching is similar to other types of coaching through guiding clients to their desired goals. But the emphasis is on prevention and management of disease through self-discovery and empowerment leading to effective self-management of lifestyle and health decisions.

Professional coaches believe their clients have the inner wisdom to know what they want, and they work from a client-centered approach using a 'guiding' method. However, health care professionals (doctors, nurses, social workers, physical therapists, nutritionists, etc) have been trained in an acute-care model where patients are told information in a directing, "do as I say" approach.

This approach has been quite successful when it comes to acute health conditions or procedures such as post-surgical recovery (eg, "Whenever you cough or sneeze hold your pillow against the stitches on your chest so it won't hurt as much". "This is how you change your wound dressing" etc.)

But has this traditional approach been as helpful for patients with chronic diseases (obesity, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, stroke)? Has "telling" patients, "You need to quit smoking, exercise more and eat healthier, slower and

more mindfully" really helped change behavior?

Health coaches believe people are more willing to embrace change when it comes from within them rather than from someone telling them they need to change. We avoid the "do as I say", trap by using "wiggle" words that help the client feel they are in charge of personal choices, not simply following someone else's instruction.

The words used during conversation and engagement take forms such as: "you might consider", "may I make a suggestion?"—wiggle words. More ways to avoid the expert trap are to: avoid "I" and "You" words (i.e. "I think..." or "You should..."), use neutral language (i.e. "people have found..." or "others have benefited from..."), and use conditional words (i.e. "would you consider..." versus "you ought to...", "you should...").

No matter how many times a health-care professional tells a client they need to quit smoking and lose weight, resistance will most likely occur until the client decides for him/herself that it is important to change. The client's awareness of his/her "ambivalence" is a key step in moving towards a healthier lifestyle. The confidence or motivation to change can be increased with the



**People embrace change that comes from within. Health Coaches help the client feel in charge of personal choices, not simply following a health-care professional's instructions.**

support of a health coach.

A key difference between professional health coaches and healthcare professionals is the plan of care. Both professionals have a plan for their respective client or patient; however, health coaches incorporate something most health care providers do not—"change talk". A client's readiness for change and confidence level for change is assessed and heavily considered prior to the coachee building the plan. When dealing with chronic diseases and the need to develop healthier habits, a client's background, culture and previous health-related experiences play a strong role in each individual's feelings and perceptions, and their willingness to embrace change and alter behavior. Failing to factor these in during the planning and development of the coaching plan is like baking an apple pie without apples.

In Hong Kong, the US, and several other industrialized nations, chronic diseases are a major cause of death. In 2009, the Hong Kong Dept of Health reported that 59.9% of the 41,034 deaths were due to chronic disease and these numbers continue to rise. Health coaching and the use of science-based Motivational Interviewing as a foundation have proven to affect behavior change and thus health outcomes.

According to the National Society of Health Coaches (USA), health coaching is a fresh new approach that guides



physicians and other healthcare professionals to use the client's agenda to enhance compliance with healthy behaviors, to prevent exacerbations of chronic illness and to support lifestyle change. Through a client-centered, approach understanding the client's real concerns, fears, etc, the health coach can guide the client to self-discovery regarding positive behavior change .

The USA's Mayo Clinic reported that of patients working with health coaches: 50% were able to lose weight and maintain the weight loss, 64% increased exercise time, 61% incorporated healthier eating choices, and 42% of smokers were able to quit for 6 months and 37% at the 12 month mark.

In conclusion, the demand for profes-

sional health coaches and the skill and approach they bring to addressing chronic conditions and health prevention and management continues to grow as positive outcomes continue to be achieved: increased compliance with medication plans and home self-management plans, decreased medical costs, less burden on healthcare systems and even decreased work absenteeism.

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