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Wellness Coaching as Lifestyle Medicine: Covering The Whole Continuum

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Globally, according to the World Health Organization, non-communicable or "lifestyle" diseases account for nearly 60 percent of deaths. By 2020, this is projected to rise to 73 percent. The lifestyle behavior factor in such diseases is critical. It has become increasingly evident that sedentary lifestyles, poor diet (as a result of industrialized food manufacture, distribution and sales as is the case for convenience and "fast foods"), greater social isolation, and increasing stress, contribute to both the onset and the course of chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, asthma, cancer, hypertension, and many others.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that chronic illness consumes 82% of U.S. healthcare resources (CDC, 2004). A *New England Journal of Medicine* article estimates that people with chronic conditions receive only 56.1% the recommended care for their health challenges. The cost of medical non-compliance (which is entirely behavioral) is in the billions. (McGlynn, Asch, et. al., 2003). In summary, the cost of chronic disease combined with the cost of medical non-compliance for these diseases is staggering. What is to be done?

Health educators, nurses, corporate wellness programmers and others involved in the wellness field over the past thirty years have long pointed to the consummate sensibility of prevention. Entire programs were built around the reduction of health risks and the prevention of illness. Now we see undeniable evidence that helping people change behaviors and reduce health risks, is an essential part of any wise treatment program for most, if not all chronic medical conditions (American College of Lifestyle Medicine).

As professionals in the wellness field, we now face the two-fold challenge of promoting prevention while also being part of the treatment solution. The people we serve span the entire continuum from those with severe health challenges to all who aspire for peak performance, and living joyful, meaningful and satisfying lives. In short, as we zero in on the behavioral nature of health, it is increasingly apparent that wellness professionals, are uniquely qualified to help. So what is the best way to help people change?

We have learned what does not work. The old models of "prescribe and treat" and "educate and implore" have caused a real lack of faith in "behavioral medicine" because they simply don't result in behavioral change often enough or in ways that last. Just telling people what to do, even very authoritatively, or giving them great information and begging them to change, won't get the job done.

As James Prochaska said, "Change is a process, not an event." (Prochaska, et. al., 1994). Essentially, those seeking to effect lifestyle change, do not need a "lecture and a curfew" to get them home safely, they need guidance and support through the entire process of change. This suggests a need for a paradigm shift in the way we do things. Fortunately, such a shift has already been quietly taking place for the past several years.

We have recently seen the development of health and wellness coaching strategies for addressing the lifestyle behaviors that impact healthcare costs and public health. Making widespread use of health and wellness coaches, disease management companies have become a growing part of the healthcare industry that seeks to implement some of these new strategies. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP's) are beginning to include health and wellness coaching in their services. Self-insured companies are exploring these same strategies to improve the health of their populations and thus contain rising healthcare costs. Increasingly, wellness professionals in hospitals and corporate wellness programs are being asked to work with clients one-on-one, using a coach approach to increase the probability of real success.

Health coaches can vary substantially in their methods and in their training backgrounds. They range from highly qualified masters degree-level counselors, ICF certified coaches, and registered nurses, all the way to less educated phone bank employees. Their contacts with clients range from 30-50 minute unlimited coaching sessions to quarterly ten-minute "check-in" appointments that mostly focus on encouraging good medical compliance. Some coaches work with health risk assessment feedback and some are there merely to provide information about wellness program and insurance program benefits.

Clients with a health challenge have historically received a "lifestyle prescription" from a healthcare provider. They are often told to be less sedentary, manage stress better, get more sleep, improve their nutrition, etc. But these prescriptions often go unfilled. The truth is that if the client is directed to a well-trained wellness coach, the prescription for lifestyle change has a much better chance of being successfully "filled."

The wellness coach can guide the client through processes to 1) assess their current level of wellness; 2) envision and determine areas of focus to work on; 3) factor in key elements such as readiness for change; 4) identify measurable outcomes; 5) determine a course of commitment and connect with motivation; 6) determine challenges in the way of success; 7) develop strategies to overcome those challenges; 8) identify and recruit sources of support for the journey; and 9) secure accountability methods to ensure success. The value that wellness coaching contributes to the field of lifestyle medicine should be increasingly apparent as we implement such models and study them further.

An important rule of thumb to follow when seeking wellness coach training is to focus specifically on lifestyle behavioral change instead of "generalist" training. Programs that integrate the best of the art and science of health promotion with the skills and methodologies of life coaching provide a strong foundation for the developing wellness coach. A number of good coach training programs will be featured at the National Wellness Conference this summer.

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