Best Practices in Health Behavior Change



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The issues most responsible for driving up healthcare costs are the result of health-averse behaviors: smoking, obesity, poor nutrition, and physical inactivity. Employers seeking to help employees improve their personal health have access to a variety of solutions, including programs designed to foster lasting behavior change. The most effective behavior change programs are evidence-based, built on years of scientific research and results measured within the marketplace. Examination of these programs' success reveals a set of best practices that employers may want to consider when evaluating any behavior change program.

This paper provides an overview of best practices that have been proven to produce consistent results. It is based on interviews with Alere health coaches, studies published by the Alere Health research team, and feedback from Alere program participants.

Personal Barriers to Behavior Change

People naturally resist changing their behaviors, and the personal barriers behind that resistance are as individual as your employees. The most common of these barriers lie in notions promoted in the marketplace. People are bombarded with promotions suggesting that health goals can be achieved, not by changing behavior, but with pills, herbal remedies, alternative nicotine delivery systems, the latest exercise equipment, and similar offerings that promise all-gain, no-pain results.

Additional personal barriers come from positive associations built into negative behaviors. Unhealthy foods are often called "comfort foods." Smokers believe that cigarettes relieve stress, without realizing that each light-up is merely the temporary gratification of a craving that comes from an addiction.

Most people have a general idea of what they need to do to lose weight or quit smoking, but their attempts to address their issues often fall flat because of unseen barriers which they haven't yet recognized or addressed. Health coaching that uses cognitive behavioral techniques is an effective way to help people identify and remove these barriers. Coaches encounter common barriers routinely, and are adept at breaking them down to make way for positive benefits to come.

Best Practices Essential to Any Successful Behavior Change Program

Behavior change programs empower employees to improve their personal health by addressing smoking, obesity, nutrition, physical activity, and stress. Tools and support methodologies are specific to each behavioral area, and each employee's situation is addressed individually. At a high level, however, there are three best practices that are essential to success in any program:

- **HELP EMPLOYEES DERIVE MOTIVATION FROM WHAT MATTERS MOST TO THEM IN LIFE.** For most employees, reversing unhealthy lifestyle behaviors is a huge undertaking, one that requires overcoming personal barriers and years of habit to permanently adopt new behaviors. Coaches work with each program participant to uncover deeply held core values to form motivation that will affect lasting change, which is rarely derived from short-term motivators that pass with time.
- **WORK WITH EMPLOYEES TO CREATE INCREMENTAL GOALS THEY CAN EASILY ACHIEVE ON THE WAY TO LARGER GOALS.** Employees in behavior change programs succeed best in their journeys by achieving smaller, supporting goals in an orchestrated series along the way. Few people can quit smoking in a single cold-turkey step, for example, but many people can succeed at individual steps that make long-term goals possible.
- **ESTABLISH A PERSONAL BOND THAT ENABLES TRUSTED GUIDANCE.** To succeed in uncovering and sustaining motivation, and in formulating incremental goals appropriate for the individual, a best practice for coaches is to establish a "therapeutic alliance." By developing a personal connection through a warm, empathic and genuine relationship with the employee, the employee is best able to accept effective guidance toward successful change.

Best Practice #1: Help employees derive motivation from what matters most to them in life

We all know people who have lost weight only to gain it back, joined a gym and stopped going after a few months, or quit smoking only to take it up again. Such temporary behavior changes are likely to occur when change is driven by external motivators of short duration, such as wanting to lose weight for an upcoming public event or to honor a New Year's resolution, or entering a corporate-sponsored program solely because of a financial incentive. These external motivators may serve as springboards to action, but the window of motivation that accompanies them often closes too quickly to produce sustained results.

Success in any behavior change program depends on a high level of sustained engagement, and that engagement is best secured when tied to deeply important, internal motivators. Examples of personal motivators include:

- The desire to be there for grandchildren as they grow older
- An interest in participating in more physical activities with a spouse or partner
- A conviction that one should treat the body well in keeping with faith or to be a role model for children
- A belief that being healthier leads to a happier, more productive life
- A personal desire to be physically fit, strong and energetic

Most people have core values they're willing to support with tremendous efforts, whether they realize it or not. Effective behavior change programs help people identify their core values and how their behaviors support or conflict with those values. Personal commitments to family and self can be translated to lasting motivators that deliver a sense of empowerment.

Of course, motivation must also promote results. Once people decide they really want to change behaviors, they need to see positive outcomes from their hard work along the way. Motivation must be accompanied by achievable, incremental goals.

Best Practice #2: Create incremental goals that employees can easily achieve on the way to larger goals

People with the best intentions can fail at self-directed behavior change because of the tendency to focus solely on the end goal, such as losing 30 pounds. Any end goal can begin to look impossible when substantial early efforts deliver minor progress compared to the end goal. Having no incremental goals to meet along the way toward a big leap risks failure. Someone attempting to force a complete conversion through sheer willpower will inevitably focus on what they're not doing yet, rather than having positive things to focus on instead.

People who undertake health behavior change realize the greatest success when they work toward goals that are SMART: specific, measureable, attainable, realistic, and time-based. By working toward a major change with small goals along the way, each achievement enables the person to feel better about the overall effort; more empowered and confident about the next step. Behavior change program participants typically feel great about interim progress when they have accomplished just a little, even feeling pleasantly surprised at how much better they feel after the first few weeks.

It's important to help participants avoid discouragement when they fail to meet incremental goals. There has to be room for adjustment, as getting behind in dates is no reason to abandon an entire effort. Assistance with those adjustments is one of many reasons it's critical to have a coach as a guide in behavior change.

Best Practice #3: Establish a personal bond that invites trusted guidance

The motivations that keep people on the path to successful and sustained behavior change, and the incremental goals that guide them along that path, cannot be managed in a one-size-fits-all program. The reasons for unhealthy lifestyle behaviors are as varied as the people who need to correct them. Course correction requires individual assistance, and effective individual assistance depends entirely on trust.

That's because many people simply aren't accustomed to asking for help with their personal lives, or telling people they've just met about their aspirations and challenges. A skilled behavior coach will employ clinical techniques to establish a personal relationship that creates a comfortable foundation for employees to accept guidance. It's a process that builds trust by being caring, respectful, and knowledgeable.

In establishing and sustaining that trust, coaches are able to more fully understand each employee, including challenges and priorities, to achieve buy-in and to sustain engagement. This therapeutic alliance is driven by coaching activities that are designed to:

- **DISCOVER THE PERSON THROUGH INTERVIEWING.** Skilled coaches know how to ask the right questions that bring ambivalence and resistance to the surface so that they can be resolved, as opposed to merely issuing directives. Engaging the employee in this manner is the key to individualized self-realization and ownership.
- **IDENTIFY THE RIGHT ACTIVITIES TO DELIVER DESIRED RESULTS.** The employee who wants to lose weight and believes the best course of action is to do Pilates, for example, also needs to be steered instead toward calorie reduction – and how to do that safely and sustainably.
- **UNCOVER INTERNAL MOTIVATIONS AND KEEP MOTIVATION HIGH.** Many people, even if they're not aware of it, have cherished ties to someone or something that can help inform motivation. Coaches are adept at uncovering those motivations for more complete engagement, revisiting motivations periodically to sustain them.
- **REINFORCE SUCCESS WITH INCREMENTAL GOALS.** Many people participating in a challenging program need encouragement along the way. Coaches can provide consistent reinforcement that helps employees take credit for, and feel good about, the positive steps they take, however small those steps may be.
- **ADJUST THE INCREMENTAL GOALS THAT GUIDE THE PLAN.** Even the most skilled planning won't produce a perfect plan, and adjustments inevitably need to be made along the way. A personally engaged coach who knows the employee well and is familiar with that person's successes and challenges is best equipped to guide those adjustments.
- **COMMUNICATE WITH THE PERSON ACCORDING TO PREFERENCES.** Some people communicate best by in-person conversation, others by phone, still others by texting, and yet others by email or online health portals – or some combination of those elements. It's important that communications that drive health changes fit the employee's communication style. Timing of communications is important as well; contact made when it best suits the employee's schedule will further the effort much more than phone messages left at inopportune times.
- **ANSWER QUESTIONS.** Employees engaged in a behavior change program will have many questions that must be answered to sustain progress. Coaches are available to answer those questions consistently, with knowledge of the individual's situation at hand.

Throughout it all, it's the employee who must do the heavy lifting. As with any complex undertaking, coaching is an irreplaceable component to supporting the employee to get the lifting done.

Summing It Up

To the employee who needs to address unhealthy lifestyle behaviors, making the necessary change can seem like a momentous, nearly impossible undertaking. Without proven tools and methodologies, it often is insurmountable, which is why we see a prevalence of modifiable risk behaviors in the first place. In truth, most smokers know they need to quit and would like to. More than half of them try every year with the vast majority not being successful. Rarely do people enjoy being obese or otherwise in unfavorable health when they know a change in behavior could make them feel better.

A professional health behavior change program can do wonders to help employees realize the healthier lifestyles available to them with proper motivation, incremental goals, and professional coaching assistance. For more information, visit www.alerewellbeing.com to learn more about the Alere™ Coaching Solution, the Weight Talk® program brought to you by the American Diabetes Association and Alere Wellbeing, and the Quit For Life® program, brought to you by the American Cancer Society and Alere Wellbeing.