# Overcoming Employee Disengagement

Incentives can kick-start a wellness effort, but a health coach may be needed to help an employee overcome personal barriers to making long-lasting behavioral changes.

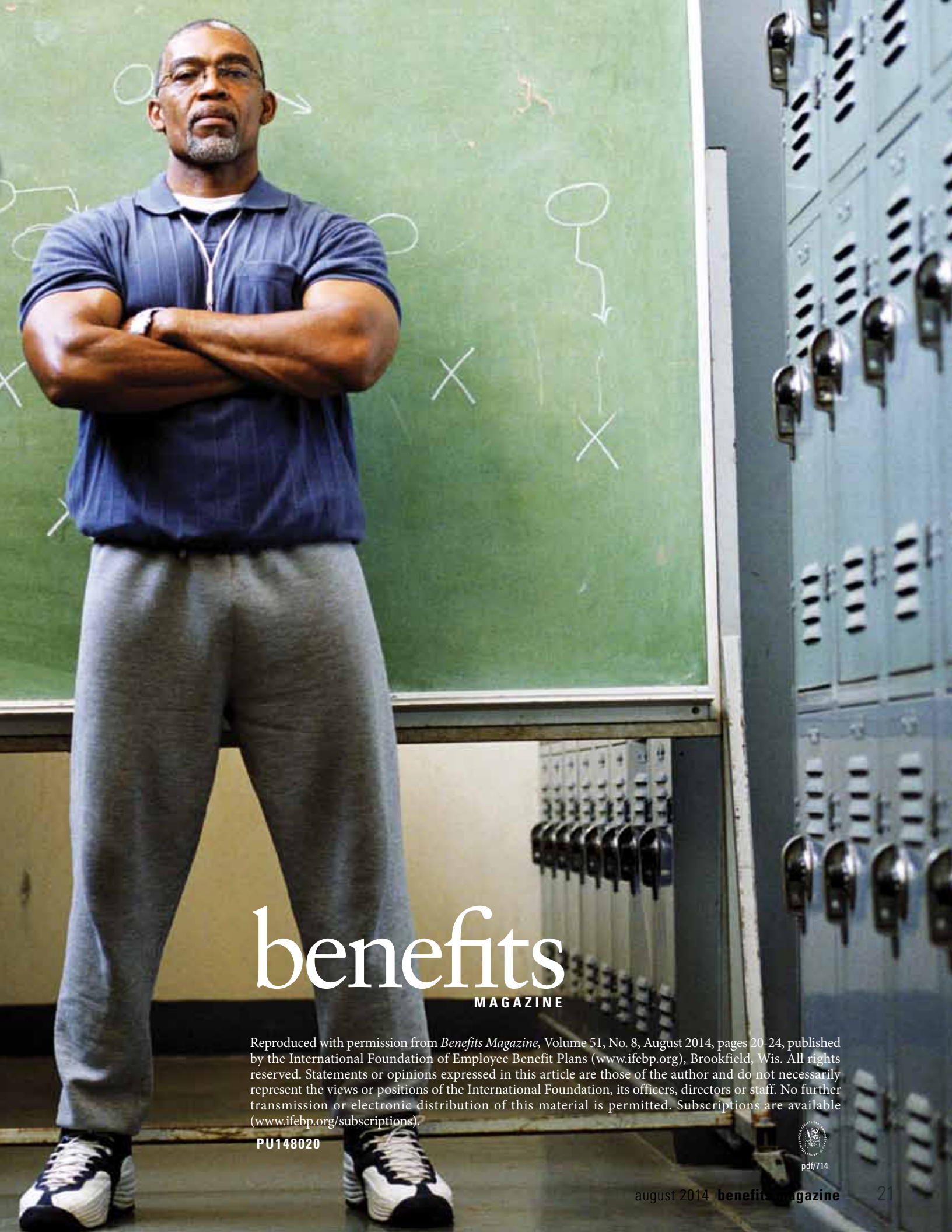
*by* | **Anne Herman**

Despite the best efforts of employers to provide access to wellness programs that improve health and quality of life, many employees continue to resist participation or participate only on a superficial level to earn an incentive or to respond to an external pressure.

A 2013 RAND Health study found that less than half of employees (46%) participate in health risk assessment (HRA) or clinical screenings, and out of those identified as needing a wellness program, less than a fifth choose to participate. Why would anyone choose not to do something that could make his or her life better?

The answer is simple: personal barriers.

People need help identifying and dissolving personal barriers that keep them from making healthy changes in their lives. Health and wellness programs that address the underlying root causes of disengagement can lead employees to healthy behavior change that is sustained for the long term. Without uncovering barriers, most of the disengaged population are unlikely to participate, and the ones who defeat the odds will engage only for a short period of time or inconsistently.



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## Education Not Enough to Drive Change

Traditional health and wellness programs focus on education and compliance with standardized regimens. While this approach is important and needs to be part of a behavior change strategy, it is not compelling enough to overcome personal barriers. The expectation of traditional approaches is that employees will become motivated to engage in healthier behaviors because they have learned what can happen to their health if they do not.

If educating employees were enough, there would not be so many smokers with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) who continue to smoke, overweight people with type 2 diabetes who continue to overeat and people with serious illnesses who are not taking their medications properly.

An employee may have every intention of following through on a care plan developed with a telephonic nurse or health coach but then become distracted by a personal barrier. For instance, what if the employee has marriage problems? What if the employee is a father who has to work two jobs to put food on the table? Coaches cannot fix these problems, but they can help the employee to find assistance from other professionals and community resources. At the same time, they can teach the employees how to substitute healthy coping strategies for the old, unhealthy ones.

It may seem daunting to health coaches and clinicians to realize that part of their work is to help people with personal as well as health problems. The good news is that personal barriers can be overcome in the context of a behavior change program that meets people where they are in their lives. Health coaches trained in the use of cognitive behavioral techniques can help people uncover barriers and develop plans to address them. This is the point when the behavior change process gains traction.

## Personal Barriers Unique to Each Individual

Personal barriers are innumerable and unique to each employee. As employees often are not aware that they even have personal barriers, the real challenge is how to help each employee discover his or her own. Most barriers faced by employees fit into four categories: emotional/cognitive, environmental, entrenched habits and biological.

### *Emotional and Cognitive Barriers*

Emotional issues such as lack of confidence may affect a person's willingness to engage in behavior change. When employees can share their emotional barriers with a health coach, they set the stage for exploring solutions.

Sometimes an unhealthy behavior like smoking or overeating fills an emotional need. Employees may use their break time to smoke or get a candy bar. A skilled coach can brainstorm with the employee to find healthy ways to take breaks and lay out a plan to gradually create new habits.

Unproductive thought patterns lead to skepticism and doubt. "All-or-nothing" thinking is a common culprit in derailing healthy behavior plans. Sometimes employees believe that if they overeat at one meal, they've blown their diet and they may as well give up. This is where the concept of a *slip* is useful. A skilled coach can present the idea that it's possible to get right back on track after a slip, without any guilt or discouragement.

Another common unproductive thought pattern is to see junk food as a reward, thinking, "I deserve a treat." When a coach helps a person reframe that thought, he or she comes to see an apple or a walk as more desirable. In a real-life example, a female participant of a health coaching program believed she had to obey her cravings. She saw them as a genuine need. When her coach presented her with the idea that a craving was just a craving and that she had a choice as to whether she obeyed

## takeaways >>

- People need help identifying and dissolving personal barriers that keep them from making healthy changes in their lives.
- Personal barriers to behavior change can be emotional, environmental, entrenched and biological.
- Coaches can help employees find professionals and community resources and teach them how to substitute healthy coping strategies for old, unhealthy ones.
- Pressure from outside sources can detract from an employee's desire for change.
- A person's core values are the source of motivation that enables him or her to make difficult, lasting behavior changes, like quitting smoking and losing weight.
- Extrinsic motivators like financial incentives are more effective when offered in conjunction with personalized health coaching.

it, the woman was free to choose a more healthy behavior.

***Environmental Barriers***

Some employees live in environments that are not supportive of change. Someone who wants to quit smoking may be married to a smoker who is not ready to quit. Someone who wants to cut back on drinking alcohol may fear losing his or her friends and social life. Their lifestyle behaviors are often rooted in environmental triggers. In these cases, coaches work with employees to adjust their environment, avoid the triggers and/or find other ways to cope.

***Entrenched Habits***

Entrenched habits are often linked to environmental triggers. One participant in a smoking-cessation program believed he couldn't change because he was "a creature of habit." He mentioned that he always smoked in the bathroom in the morning. The coach suggested changing his routine by using a different bathroom. The man said he could use his wife's bathroom, a place where smoking was banned. His confidence rose, and he began to show some enthusiasm for his plan. Avoiding an environmental trigger turned out to be the key to breaking a longstanding habit.

***Biological Barriers***

Some unhealthy behaviors, such as overeating and smoking, can lead to physical dependencies. Very few people can quit these behaviors cold turkey, but there are ways to manage the physical side effects, such as nicotine patches, medications and participating in self-help groups. A serious biological reality about weight loss is that losing too much weight in a short period of time signals the brain that the body is starving; that's why fad diets generally don't work. Employees need to understand these biological barriers and how to manage them properly.

## A Strong Coaching Relationship Has an Impact

A highly trained coach uses a tone that balances professionalism and friendliness. Assessing the employee's unique situation and asking permission to share insights also further trust. The coach is encouraging, conveying acceptance rather than judgment. He or she raises confidence by working with the employee to set realistic goals, create a plan that harnesses existing strengths, find substitutes for the unhealthy behaviors and enlist social support.

When employees experience personalized interactions and trusting relationships with health coaches, they are more likely to feel safe enough to work with and overcome personal barriers.

## Personal Motivators Key to Overcoming Barriers

A common barrier among many employees is pressure from outside sources. Employees can become so focused on the perceived discrimination of enforced health programs or higher insurance rates for smokers or the overweight that they are completely distracted from their own real desire for change. Pressure from family members may also cloud an employee's own motivation. A skillful coach can gently guide the employee back to his or her own core values and inquire as to how they might be expressed in the area of healthy behaviors.

A participant in a smoking-cessation program overcame his resistance when he discovered his personal motivators. In an interaction with a health coach, he expressed that he absolutely did not want to quit. He said he was being forced to participate in the program by his employer, which he deeply resented. He was adamant that he would not be forced to do something he did not want to do.

Rather than object or argue with him, his coach said she understood how he felt and indicated that she would not try to talk him into quitting. She suggested that they continue the call anyway, just on a hypothetical basis, with no pressure. The participant agreed. When the coach asked

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him how many times he previously had tried to quit, he said he had tried at least 20 times. This indicated to the coach that he actually did want to quit; he was just discouraged.

His coach asked him to imagine a hypothetical situation in which he wanted to quit and what the reasons would be for quitting. The man thought about it and said he would like to be able to climb the stairs without getting winded. He said his wife would be happier without the smell, and he wouldn't have to feel so much fear about his health before every doctor visit. By deliberating on this question, he discovered how he could benefit from quitting. By shifting his focus from external pressure to the benefits of quitting, he tapped into a strong source of personal motivation.

## Personal Motivators Key to Behavior Change

Personal motivators are referred to in science as *intrinsic* motivators, or motivators that come from a person's internal core values and beliefs. If people change a behavior based on an intrinsic motivator, the reward feels consistent with the way they want to live their lives. For example, a person loses weight to have more energy, be a good role model for his or her family or be more physically active.

Intrinsic motivators are deep values a person may carry through a lifetime—values like learning or growth, the ambition to achieve, caring for loved ones or a desire to make a difference. *Core values* can drive people to go beyond their comfort zones because they are acting in service of something more important to them. Research shows that core values are the source of more sustainable motivation, enabling people to accomplish difficult, long-term projects like quitting smoking or losing significant amounts of weight.

In contrast, *extrinsic* motivators are rewards that people give themselves or earn from an external source for changing a behavior. Because the pleasurable impact is short-term, extrinsic motivators are not sufficient for producing sustained behavior change. Examples include losing weight to buy a new dress or look good in a wedding, or participating in a wellness program to earn a financial incentive.

## Extrinsic Motivators Jump-Start Behavior Change

Extrinsic motivators like financial incentives are proven tools for getting employees started on a plan to change a behavior. But they are most effective when offered in conjunction with personalized health coaching focused on uncovering personal barriers and discovering personal motivators.

In a 2013 Towers Watson/National Business Group survey, 62% of employers indicated they offered financial incentives for participating in wellness programs. However, employers are beginning to catch on that providing incentives for participation alone is not leading to the sustained behavior changes necessary to improve health and reduce costs. That same survey found that a small but growing percentage (16%) of employers decided to get tougher by offering incentives for actual improvements in biometric values like blood pressure or cholesterol. Some big companies are even starting to penalize, charging employees for smoking or having large waistlines.

Financial incentives are strong tools for motivating employees to complete discrete activities, such as coaching calls or self-paced online programs focusing on improving health risks like nutrition, physical activity and stress. They are a powerful way to give employees the fuel they need to take the first step. But if programs are not designed to uncover barriers and personal motivators, employees may improve their health risk for a while and then revert to old habits.

So how can employers foster healthy, lasting behavior change based on intrinsic motivation? They can encourage employees to participate in coaching programs by educating them about how their coach will interact with them and the benefits they can expect to see. An evidence-based personalized health coaching program that engages participants at the level of core values may be the key solution employers are seeking to increase engagement, improve health and reduce health care costs.


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**Anne Herman** is a professional health coach who has coached clients in behavior change for a total of 19 years. She is currently a Quit Coach Three, the highest tier of coach at Alere Wellbeing. Herman earned a B.A. degree in philosophy at the University of New Hampshire, completed the 2,000-hour Landmark Education Team Management and Leadership Program and has had training in motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral therapy and the science of tobacco cessation.