

Current Research on Diabetes and Health Coaching

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This article aims to highlight two recent studies exploring the role of health coaching in diabetes prevention and care.

Chances are good that you or someone you love is one of the 26 million Americans affected by type 2 diabetes. With an additional 79 million Americans at risk for developing the disease, chances are also good that you'll encounter diabetic or prediabetic individuals in your practice as a health coach.¹ Given the complex demands of managing Type 2 diabetes and a disease toll that is likely to rise significantly in the coming decades due to the level of obesity in the U.S. population, diabetes prevention and care has been identified as an important focus in the emerging body of research on health coaching. Several ongoing and recently published studies point to promising trends in the role of coaching in diabetes prevention and care; this article will highlight two of them.

At the end of February, health insurance provider UnitedHealth Group launched the pilot study Project NOT ME to evaluate the effectiveness of using video-on-demand (VOD) programming to deliver its Diabetes Prevention Program.² With the help of Comcast, study subjects in the Knoxville, TN and Philadelphia, PA markets are being recruited to participate in the innovative, year-long study, which will feature health and wellness coaches in each of 16 "reality-style" VOD episodes. The episodes will follow six pre-diabetic adult participants as they go through behavioral coaching with the shared goals of weight loss and reducing their risk of developing Type 2 diabetes. During a five-month active intervention phase, study subjects will be asked to practice skills learned from the program and complete action-oriented assignments between episodes with the support of weekly calls from the research team, healthy living tips, and tracking tools for monitoring activity patterns and eating habits.³

The launch of the Project NOT ME study builds upon a growing body of research showing that health coaching is a powerful tool for managing the complex lifestyle factors that play into diabetes. The study's funding source—a health insurance provider—suggests encouraging possibilities in the role of coaching in the health care system. A significant limitation of the current body of research, however, is the lack of consensus across studies in terms of what a "health coach" is.

The Project NOT ME website (www.projectnotmedp.com) describes the study coaches as "trained Diabetes Prevention Program facilitators with behavioral coaching experience."³ A 2010 article on another UnitedHealth diabetes prevention study featuring wellness coaches narrates that "...the ever-encouraging wellness coaches offered advice, from eating smaller amounts of high-fat foods to finding substitutes for things that can sabotage a diet."⁴ This

advice-giving role for coaches differs substantially from the coaching role described in the results of a Duke study published in 2010.⁵

Featuring integrative health (IH) coaches, the Duke study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of IH coaching on psychosocial factors, behavior change, and glycemic control in patients with Type 2 diabetes. Fifty-six participants were randomized to six months of IH coaching or six months of usual care (control group); the coaching group received coaching support that linked behavioral goals to their individual values and personal vision of health. The agenda and discussion topics for each coaching session were those of the study subjects, rather than the coaches. Improvements were seen in the coaching group's self-reported medication adherence, level of engagement, perceived social support, and glycemic control; these changes were not observed in the control group.

Although specific coaching techniques and applications may vary widely across current research studies, both the Duke study and Project NOT ME point to the significant value of the coach as a supportive behavior change expert in the process of preventing and managing diabetes. The increasing buy-in of health insurance providers such as UnitedHealth, along with a growing literature of research results highlighting the powerful impact of coaching on diabetes prevention and care, can only bode well for patients and for coaches.

References:

¹ <http://notme.com/dpca/Home.html>

² http://www.drugstorenews.com/article/unitedhealthgroup-comcast-launch-pilot-evaluate-video-demand-programming-diabetes-prevention?utm_source=GoogleNews&utm_medium=Syndication&utm_campaign=ManualSitemap

³ <http://www.projectnotmedp.com/faq.php>

⁴ <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2010/11/22/16-weeks-later-class-is-leaner-more-fit.html>

⁶ Wolever, R. Q., Dreusicke, M., Fikkan, J., Hawkins, T. V., Yeung, S., Wakefield, J., Duda, L., Flowers, P., Cook, C., and Skinner, E. (2010). Integrative health coaching for patients with type 2 diabetes: a randomized clinical trial. *The Diabetes Educator*, 36(4), 629-639.