

Help Me Get Fit, Coach

The Wall Street Journal (February 26, 2012)

Written by Kristen Gerencher

Retrieved from:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203358704577237184016187486.html>

They don't carry whistles or bench you after a bad night, but health coaches increasingly are helping patients up their game in terms of wellness.

Health coaches are typically nurses, dietitians, diabetes educators, social workers or pharmacists who contact health-plan members with chronic medical conditions or those at high risk of developing them.

Their main mission: Help patients confront challenges such as managing their medications, losing weight and increasing their physical activity levels—all of which can lead to less pain and lower medical costs over time.

Health coaches often use motivational interviewing techniques to help people build confidence, set personal health goals and stick to them. Coaches may ask participants to keep a journal of their daily eating habits or blood-sugar readings, for example, so participants can monitor their progress and alert the coach to obstacles.

Some primary-care doctors, pressed to address patients' complex medical needs in short visits, are training their medical assistants to coach as part of a team-based approach to care. Coaches can offer patients emotional support and serve as a liaison to the doctor, says Heather Bennett, a family physician in San Francisco who has trained health coaches. "Health coaching is a nice way to give patients extra health care without paying extra money for doctors' visits, which might not be the right thing for diet and exercise anyway," she says.

Meantime, more employers are asking for coaching services that target total well-being, says Janet Calhoun, vice president of strategy, innovations and solutions for Healthways, a company that offers health-improvement products, based in Franklin, Tenn. "When people have a balance of physical, social and emotional health," she says, "they cost less [to the company]...and they're much more productive in that they miss fewer days of work."

Sue Mischke says she welcomed the chance to have a health coach when her doctor referred her to a research study. Sick of the side effects from her diabetes and hypertension drugs and scared by her conditions, the 68-year-old was motivated to give coaching a try.

That was 2½ years ago, when Ms. Mischke weighed 220 pounds and started talking to her coach on the phone once a week. The coaching sessions grew less frequent when she began dropping significant weight after a few months. Through a combination of increased exercise and dietary changes, she lost about 80 pounds and was able to ditch her troublesome medications.

"I don't believe I would have lost [the weight] on my own, or at least I certainly wouldn't have kept it off," says Ms. Mischke, a geneticist for the Agricultural Research Service in Beltsville, Md.

If your insurance plan gives you access to a health coach, here are a few tips to get the most of it:

A health coach should build trust with you right away by being organized and prepared when you have conversations. The coach should call you at the appointed time and remember your name and what you last spoke about, says Grace Derocha, a health coach with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan in Detroit.

A coach should help you cope with peer pressure and give you alternatives for scenarios such as eating out.

Expect a coach to ask detailed questions about your exercise and diet preferences and how much family support you have at home. Many coaches will include family members on the calls if it is appropriate.

Prepare to be held accountable to your goals. "If you're not committed, then you're probably not going to be successful," Ms. Mischke says, "and you'll rack up one more case of 'I can't do it.' "