

conversation

with
Michael Arloski, Ph.D.

Everyone wants to be healthy. The problem is that even though people may know what they need to do to improve their lifestyles, they don't have a systematic plan or anyone to help them overcome the challenges that may arise, said Michael Arloski, Ph.D. Offering wellness coaching can be an effective strategy for helping employees take better charge of their health, said Arloski, who is the author of Wellness Coaching for Lasting Lifestyle Change and the founder and CEO of Real Balance Global Wellness Services Inc., which trains health care professionals and wellness coaches. Arloski is a psychologist, coach and board member of the National Wellness Institute and spoke at the Health Benefits Conference & Expo (HBCE) in January. He discussed the benefits of wellness coaching with editor Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS.



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What is wellness coaching?

Wellness coaching is more than just keeping healthy people healthy; it's a way to help people who already have lifestyle-related illnesses affect the course of those illnesses in an optimal way. When employees have diseases such as heart disease or diabetes and other chronic illnesses, how well they manage that illness is largely determined by their success at improving their lifestyle. Instead of just educating and imploring people to change, we're actually giving them an ally and a proven behavioral change methodology to help them succeed at changing their lifestyle. People need help through the behavioral-change process, and not just at the beginning. That's where having an ally who works with them to provide methodology, support, accountability—helping them develop an actual plan for change, not just setting a bunch of goals, but a real plan—can make a huge difference.

How is coaching typically delivered?

Wellness coaching is mostly delivered telephonically, and that's really quite effective, but it can also be delivered in person on site. It can be delivered individually, or it can be done in small group formats. That's particularly effective when

people have a shared health challenge like being overweight or having diabetes. But a real key is to make wellness coaching part of a comprehensive wellness program. It's not a substitute for a wellness program. It's part of it. It's really a delivery mechanism to individualize a comprehensive wellness program.

Why should employers consider offering it as a benefit?

Employers want to save money on their health care costs, and one of the things we've been seeing is that the real benefits of wellness in general are not just return on investment but also what we're calling *VOI*: value on investment. Wellness programs have always been about not just saving money on health care costs but on affecting productivity, absenteeism, presenteeism, employee turnover and performance. Let's face it, employee health is not just about patching up the wounded. It's about an employee population functioning at their very best.

How are programs typically set up?

It's done a variety of ways. It may be offered as a benefit through the employer's insurance program. A lot of the big insurance carriers have their

own wellness coaches. Some employee assistance programs offer health and wellness coaching. It may be provided by nurses, health educators or others who are part of a corporate wellness program. Coaching is sometimes done on a basis where it's recognized that it's important to keep the healthy people healthy. Even if you're doing well, it's important to have a plan to stay that way because, over time, most people end up with lifestyles that are not optimal for maintaining health and wellness. All too often wellness coaching is restricted because of the cost to a smaller number of people, and those are the identified high-risk people. The problem there is if you only identify high-risk people and only provide it for them, you're ignoring the huge population that will migrate to become high risk without any wellness attention. The other thing that is done is a tiered approach depending on the level of health risk, where some people may get minimal exposure to a wellness program through a health risk assessment or something like that. Some may be offered individual coaching, and others may work with group coaching.

Are there risks or disadvantages to offering wellness coaching?

The only thing that can backfire is if it's poorly presented as a requirement to meet an incentive. Otherwise, coaching really is not a form of treatment, so the risk goes way down immediately. It's considered education or consultation. Coaches and coaching companies provide their own liability insurance as well, so the risks or disadvantages are pretty minimal.

What's the best way to implement a program?

It's important to introduce wellness coaching almost from a market development standpoint, because the population

isn't familiar with what it is, how it works or how it can be a benefit to them. Mandatory coaching never works, because you end up with people who resent being required to be there. Something we've got to understand is that everybody wants to be healthy—absolutely everyone. Some people have had so many failures that their self-efficacy is so low that it appears they're not interested in being healthy and well, but that's more about their disillusionment and their discouragement. We have to offer wellness coaching in a very positive light, like it really is an opportunity to finally succeed, and that this is something different.

Quite often incentives are used to engage people, and incentives are kind of a double-edged sword. They can be viewed very negatively. Incentives get people through the door, and then the coach has the challenge of demonstrating that he or she can be an ally and not just an enforcer of a requirement. The best incentives are based on outcomes—the results you get in changing your lifestyle—not just on participation. An example of an outcome-based incentive would be if you drop a certain percentage of body fat over the year, then you get the incentive rather than going through the motions of seeing the coach. Probably some of the most effective incentives offered are things like time off. Quite often they are a discount on health insurance.

We really need to get treatment providers on board to let them know that wellness coaching is available, because quite often physicians want to see their patients improve their lifestyle, quit smoking, lose weight, etc., but other than admonishing them, they don't know what to do. Letting them know that the patient they're talking to may already have wellness coaching available as a benefit is a very important message for us to get out there.

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