

Helping employees make positive behavioral changes is the key to a successful worksite wellness program. Focusing strategies around three common health behavior theories may increase the likelihood that employees will adopt healthy behaviors.

Building a Worksite Wellness Program With Health Behavior Theories

by | Erin Milliken

Helping employees change their behavior to eliminate major chronic disease risk factors such as tobacco use and poor diet is the key to an effective worksite wellness program.

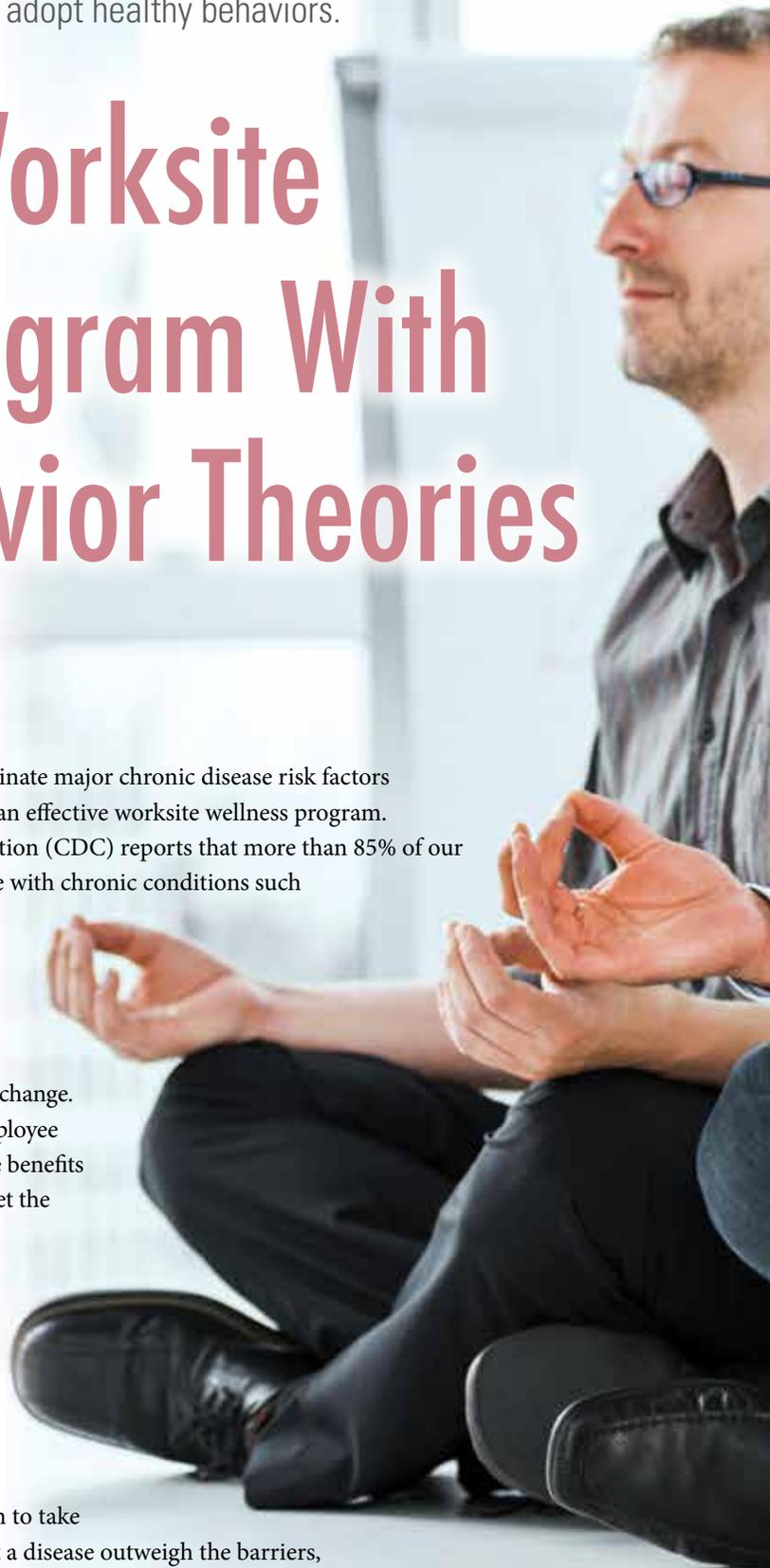
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that more than 85% of our national health care expenditures are for people with chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and cancer. The four primary risk factors for such conditions are tobacco use, poor diet, lack of physical activity and obesity. By making positive behavior changes, employees can help prevent those diseases while also increasing their quality of life.

Many employers use education to encourage behavior change. However, education alone will not lead to widespread employee health improvement. For example, many people know the benefits of exercise, but only about 20% of Americans actually meet the CDC guidelines for physical activity.

Employers looking to increase the effectiveness of their worksite wellness programs can look to three common health behavior theories that health promotion professionals report inspire behavior change.

Health Belief Model

The *health belief model (HBM)* suggests that an individual's attitude about disease impacts his or her decision to take action (or not). If the benefits of taking action to prevent a disease outweigh the barriers, the individual is likely to complete the health-related action. HBM is made of an individual's perceptions of these factors:



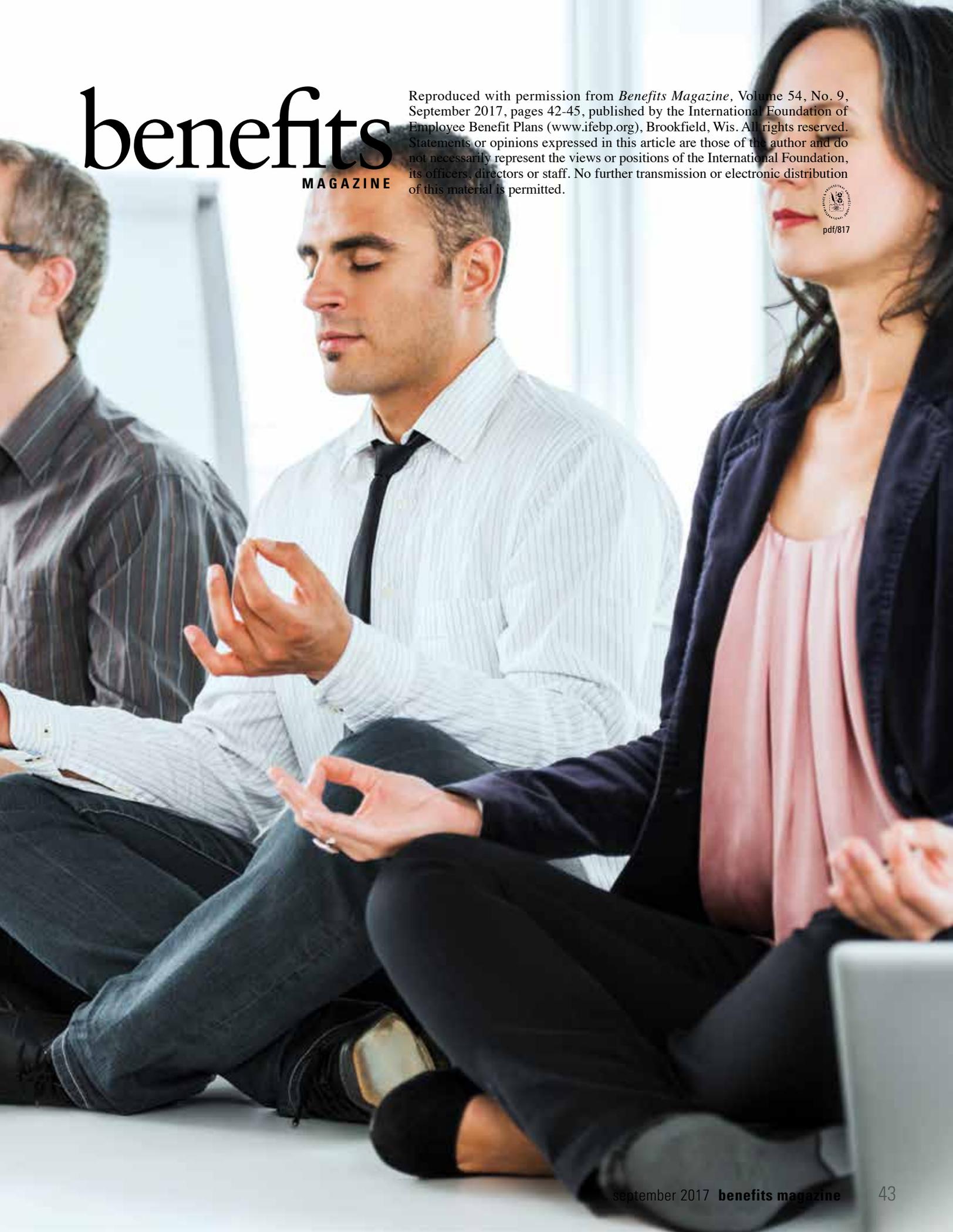
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- Susceptibility to getting the disease
- Severity of the disease
- Likelihood that the new health behavior will prevent the disease
- Barriers to or difficulties of completing the new health behavior
- Confidence in the ability to complete the new health behavior.

Communication is one way employers can incorporate HBM into worksite wellness programs. For example, to communicate with employees about diabetes, employers can use the following strategies:

- During a monthly safety meeting, show a video featuring individuals discussing their diabetes who share similarities with employees (e.g., age or industry). The safety manager also can share statistics about the prevalence of diabetes (perceived susceptibility).
- Post fliers describing the costs of living with diabetes (e.g., costs of medications), or share photos of individuals suffering from diabetes, in the company's break room or common area where employees congregate (perceived severity).
- Mail information about the worksite wellness program to employees' homes, and describe activities that can help them manage their health and prevent diseases such as diabetes (perceived benefits).

- Ask an employee who lives with diabetes and has overcome barriers in order to manage the disease to be part of a case study to share with his or her colleagues (perceived barriers).
- Through the wellness program, reinforce positive health behaviors by recognizing and rewarding employees for progress and health improvement (perceived ability).

Social-Cognitive Theory

Social-cognitive theory (SCT) suggests that individuals learn by observing others through personal, environmental and behavioral factors. Each of these factors continuously influences each other to impact employee behavior.

For example, a group of employees who do not understand a wellness program (personal) bands together to complain to senior management (behavioral). As a result, senior management sends a note to all employees explaining its support for wellness and the steps employees can take to engage (environmental).

In another example of SCT at work, an employee, Sue, loses 20 pounds by participating in the worksite wellness program (behavioral) and is publicly recognized for her achievement (environmental). A friend of Sue's at work sees how great Sue feels and looks and thus decides she wants to lose weight too (personal). The friend begins participating in the wellness program (behavioral).

takeaways

- Getting employees to make positive changes in their health behaviors is crucial to the success of a workplace wellness program.
- Wellness programs can draw on theories such as the health belief model, social-cognitive theory and the transtheoretical model to inspire behavior change.
- Under the health belief model, a person's perception of factors, including susceptibility to a disease and how difficult it would be to change behavior, affects the likelihood that he or she will complete the action.
- Employers that want to draw on social-cognitive theory might recognize employees who have made a positive behavior change to motivate others to do so.
- Under the transtheoretical model, it is important to incorporate a variety of messages and communication channels to reach employees at each stage of change.

Transtheoretical Model

The *transtheoretical model (TTM)*, also known as *stages of change*, focuses on the decision-making process an individual goes through before completing a health behavior. This model assumes that people do not make behavior changes quickly but rather go through stages (not necessarily in order) of thought before they take action. There are six stages of change.

1. **Precontemplation.** The person does not intend to take action in the foreseeable future. He or she does not realize that the behavior is problematic and may produce negative outcomes. The pros of the behavior change are underestimated, and there is a lot of emphasis on the cons.
2. **Contemplation.** The person intends to start a healthy behavior in the foreseeable future. He or she recognizes that the current behavior is problematic, and there is

equal emphasis on pros and cons of starting a healthier behavior.

3. **Preparation.** The person is ready to take action and is taking small steps toward a healthier life.
4. **Action.** The person has recently changed the behavior and intends to keep moving forward with a healthier lifestyle.
5. **Maintenance.** The person has sustained the behavior for a while and intends to keep going. He or she even makes an effort to prevent relapse into unhealthy behaviors.
6. **Termination.** The person has no desire to return to unhealthy behaviors. It is rare to reach this stage, and most people linger in the maintenance stage to focus on preventing relapse.

No one's health journey is the same, and there is no one-size-fits-all worksite wellness program. When using this theory, it is important to incorporate a variety of messages and communication channels to reach employees at each stage of change.

Employers can utilize TTM as a part of the worksite wellness program by asking employees to complete a health risk questionnaire that identifies participants' readiness to change. Through a series of questions about motivation, likelihood of behavior change and confidence in personal ability, employers can identify how likely employees are to take action.

Use Theories to Drive Healthy Behavior in the Workplace

Each of the models described works well to predict human behavior and, many times, the behaviors that wellness programs target dictate which health behavior theory to use. It is common to use multiple behavioral theories in one program as well as to pick and choose different constructs of theories that best meet the needs of a program.

Examples of how employers can apply health behavior theory in their wellness programs include the following.

- **Education and awareness:** Employers can communicate effectively by asking employees how they prefer to receive information. Messages should be personal and targeted to employee emotions. General health information should be included with each wellness program reminder.

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Barbara J. Zabawa, J.D., M.P.H., and JoAnn M. Eickhoff-Shemek, Ph.D. American Bar Association. 2017.

Visit www.ifebp.org/books.asp?9106 for more information.

Workplace Wellness That Works

Laura Putnam. Wiley. 2015.

Visit www.ifebp.org/books.asp?9058 for more information.

- **Motivation and self-efficacy:** Each employee is different and has unique motivators and skill levels. Using a variety of communication methods (e.g., e-mails, fliers, home mailers, etc.) and incentives (e.g., gift cards, Fit-bits, etc.) increases intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy.
- **Capability and resources:** Wellness program requirements should be realistic and achievable. Keeping wellness program initiatives simple to complete and understand increases employee engagement.
- **Choices and culture:** Employers can use environmental cues to inspire employees to make healthy choices, such as putting a basket of fruit in the break room instead of candy or using wellness champions in all departments to promote wellness initiatives. 

bio



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She has a bachelor's degree in biology from Transylvania University and a master's degree in public health from Western Kentucky University.