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Health care professionals are taking a new approach to wellness education

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While most of us long for better health and well-being, considerable evidence suggests that we're moving in the opposite direction. The media focus more attention than ever on healthful lifestyles, but there are now more overweight people than undernourished people worldwide. Why does this situation exist? Research appears to indicate that while the problem of obesity is very complicated, four factors in particular lead us to unwisely choose quick fixes that do not last and end up jeopardizing our confidence:

First, there are the demands of everyday life, which have never been greater.

Second, there are so many wellness guidelines, products and services available that we end up overwhelmed and confused.

Third, there is the challenge of trying to overcome the obstacles to making changes, including our inner resistance and ambivalence.

And fourth, many of us have histories of repeated failure. Most of us do not believe that we can master our weight and wellness.

We want to be well. We yearn to be in control and feel better. We want more energy. But there is an enormous gap between wanting to be well and the everyday reality of living with the mental and physical health problems that are a result of overeating, under-exercising and having too little down-time. We know intuitively what it takes to get well, but study after study has found that having knowledge is not enough to create change. The fact is that only one in 20 adults engages in the top five health behaviors: regular exercise, healthful fat intake, five servings of fruits and vegetables daily, moderate drinking and not smoking.

Studies across the country have all found that, if we truly want to turn the health of Americans around, it's important that people learn a new life skill, i.e., how to develop a personal plan for well-being. Mastering this skill will require that people become confident in their ability to change because most people don't believe in their ability to do so.

The knowledge that people must learn this new life skill is one factor that is creating many of the changes in today's health and fitness industry. In order to help people learn how to create a personal wellness plan, and believe in their ability to carry it out, we need a new way to teach people about health and wellness. The approach that is emerging comes from professional coaching, which began nearly 20 years ago and focused on life, corporate and athletic performance improvement. Now, the coaching approach, based on coaching psychology, is being taught to nurses, doctors, therapists and other health care providers.

One example of this change is the Harvard Medical School coaching class which trains medical students to effectively prescribe and coach lifestyle interventions for their patients. In addition, a new health care

professional, called the wellness (or health or lifestyle) coach, has emerged to help people master lifestyle changes related to nutrition, exercise, stress and weight management. Studies conducted to determine the effectiveness of this new approach in wellness education have determined that it increases a person's ability to be successful at achieving long-lasting behavior change and improvement in health. The new interventions focus on assessing readiness to change for each health behavior, tailoring interventions and education to match readiness, and helping clients gain new patterns of thinking, doing and relating. The focus is away from what individuals aren't doing or what isn't working for them, to an emphasis on their strengths and opportunities.

All across the world, people (insurers, consumers and employers) are trying to find approaches that will not only help reduce health care expenses but also will help all of us gain the knowledge, confidence and success that we desire to be truly well. Life and wellness coaching today is directed to the whole person - not just physical health but all the aspects of living well. The ultimate goal is that as people become aware of healthful choices and live purposefully, individual wellness will lead to wellness in families, relationships, communities and maybe the world.

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