

Employee Wellness: Phone Coaching Programs Can Be a One-On-One Way to Better Health

Each employee who gives up smoking results in an immediate savings conservatively estimated at more than \$3,000 a year in direct medical costs and lost productivity. That's according to Ann Arbor, Michigan, health coach Theresa Radosevich. You could realize similar savings, she points out, if workers lose 5 percent of their body weight, successfully participate in a fitness program, or learn job-stress management techniques. In the long run, the potential return on your investment is even greater—workers who don't develop cancer, heart disease, or diabetes are a real asset to their employers.

An emerging type of wellness program shows promise in reaching workers who haven't taken advantage of traditional wellness programs. It's called health coaching, and it has helped workers quit smoking, stick with a fitness regimen, lose weight, and develop job stress coping skills that have improved their health, their productivity, and their employers' bottom line. And here's the most interesting part: All the coaching is done by telephone.

What Is Health Coaching?

Health coaching is "a partnership between the coach and client that focuses on lifestyle goals," says Radosevich, the executive vice president for Leade Health, Inc., which provides health coaching services throughout the country.

Coaches contact their clients by telephone, conducting an initial interview using open-ended questions, reflective listening, and a "stages of change" assessment to determine how ready the client is to take action. The coach's role, Radosevich says, is to recognize and minimize barriers to change, including existing health problems like depression, anxiety,

and eating disorders. As an example, consider someone who is trying to quit smoking. A client might say, "I'm worried that if I quit smoking, I'll gain weight." A health coach can help the individual identify weight maintenance strategies to eliminate the worry that quitting smoking will result in weight gain. Coaches also provide physician referrals for clients whose medical issues are affecting their ability to improve their underlying wellness.

After the initial phone call, coaches follow up with clients by telephone to assess their progress. The number of follow-up calls is determined by the type of program and the amount of support the individual appears to need, based on the initial interview.

How Does It Work?

A vital aspect of health coaching is that it enables the individual to determine his or her own strategies for change, rather than being told by the coach what to do, says Susan Block Vézina, president of Fitness by Phone, a Southern California-based company that provides telephone-based personal training. "We support people in becoming responsible," Vézina says.

The more responsibility clients take for their own health, the more highly motivated her company has found them to be. Fitness by Phone has stopped calling clients, and now requires clients to call their trainers instead. The change resulted in an increase in compliance. "We've been amazed," Vézina says. "Fitness by Phone clients have a 75 to 80 percent compliance rate." Generally, compliance for face-to-face fitness training program is below 20 percent, she says. "We have trouble getting people to show up."

Another key factor is convenience. Vézina and Radosevich agree: It

makes a difference that the client doesn't have to meet the coach at a certain place and time. "Our coaches work seven days a week, at all times, in all time zones," says Radosevich. "They can accommodate workers who want their coaching at 9:30 p.m. on a Sunday."

Combining personal responsibility and convenience is powerful. Like Vézina, Radosevich has seen individuals succeed with phone-based health coaching who might have otherwise failed. "The national quit rate for all types of smoking cessation programs is 12 to 20 percent," she notes, but among employer groups using Leade Health's program, quit rates are 28 percent. Leade Health's weight management programs, which aim for a 5 percent reduction in body weight over a six-month period, have a 37 percent success rate. Stress management numbers are even more impressive: 50 percent of Leade Health's clients report reduced symptoms (headaches, insomnia, and stomachaches) after 6 months.

One of the most surprising results Radosevich has seen is that the program reaches men. "Wellness programs have traditionally had a hard time getting men to participate," she says, "but as many men complete our program as women." She attributes that to a third characteristic of telephone-supported programs: privacy. "You're not sitting with a group of people hearing your issues and concerns. It's one on one."

An Ounce of Prevention

"The biggest reason to put these programs in place," Radosevich says, "is to keep low-risk individuals in your company low-risk. This is truly a preventive strategy. Once an individual crosses into a high-risk or diseased category"—once a worker develops diabetes, heart disease, lung cancer, or another condition related to obesity, stress, or smoking—"they start to cost the employer a lot of money."

Health coaching may be available through your company's health plan or Employee Assistance Plan. ■