

LifeSynch

Changing behaviors, improving lives

a HUMANA[®] company

ENGAGEMENT IN WELLNESS PROGRAMS: DEFINITIONS,
EVOLUTION AND KEY FACTORS

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White Paper

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Everyone agrees that engagement is vital to the success of any wellness initiative. If employees aren't engaged, employers have wasted the time and money invested in the initiative. They stand to lose even more money and productivity if at-risk employees don't improve their health or if low-risk employees move to high-risk status.

The purpose of this white paper is to show:

- How health coaching has evolved.
- How personalized health coaching engages participants to achieve sustainable lifestyle changes.
- The importance of the positive psychology philosophy.
- Guidelines for increasing program engagement.

How Coaching Has Evolved

...“coaching” has become a buzzword and acquired the sort of overnight success status that has left coaching companies striving to meet growing demand.

The coaching industry began as a cottage industry and remained so for close to 30 years. Coaching began as classroom instruction on a specific risk factor (e.g. smoking). About 15 to 20 years ago, companies began offering phone consultation as a complement to the classroom. Many health coaching companies now offer a telephonic model with two to 10 phone calls, depending on the risk factor, over the course of a year. The usual length of each call is 15 to 30 minutes, and the client may speak with a different coach each time.

In the last two to three years, “coaching” has become a buzzword and acquired the sort of overnight success status that has left companies scurrying to meet growing demand. Established health organizations have entered the field of coaching, and insurers, EAPs and disease management companies have reassigned or renamed groups of employees to accommodate the trend, sometimes without providing any specialized training.

Because of this, “health coach” became an imprecise term, ranging from degreed counselors to self-directed online portals, and encompassing a range of professionals:

Organizations that rushed to market with poorly defined, low-quality coaching offerings have often left employers disappointed

- Disease management nurses
- Call center nurses
- Health educators
- Utilization/case management nurses
- Fitness trainers
- Any of the above who are cross-trained

However, organizations that rushed to market with poorly defined, low-quality coaching offerings have often left employers disappointed, which ultimately comes back to haunt the whole industry.

Finding the Best Model for Engagement

The most effective phone models are those that ensure the client works with the same health coach through their entire journey.

If someone who is participating in a coaching program via phone speaks to a different coach each time, there is a lack of continuity, accountability and the flexibility in the relationship to support an individual in his or her unique behavior change process.

The most effective phone models are those that ensure the client works with the same health coach through the entire journey. This enables a trusting relationship to form and helps the client feel they can be open and share his or her struggles and challenges with the coach.

The benefits of building a trusting relationship is highlighted by one of LifeSynch's wellness members:

"(My Health Coach's) mentoring has helped me lose 18 pounds so far, which I have never been able to do on my own. I would tell her all the time how she changed my life. She has laughed with me and really made me comfortable with starting this new weight loss journey. I have been more successful in such a short time than ever before. And I owe it to (my health coach). While she would always tell me it was me that made the change, I appreciated having a nonjudgmental, supportive person to help me."

In addition to telephonic coaching, many have realized that they also need to offer online coaching solutions. Online coaching can provide the convenience and easy accessibility that clients need, but use caution with online coaching that's a self-directed or a self-study course. Most Web health portals began with the premise that, if you just provide the information people need to change their lives, then they will change. But we know it takes more than information to create sustainable behavior change.

This is where truly personalized online coaching shines. An effective online format provides convenient, more frequent contact with the same coach, which, again, helps create a sustained relationship, motivation and accountability.

Positive Psychology: A Better Approach

By applying positive psychology to personal health coaching, the emphasis shifts from “How do I fix what’s wrong with me?” to “How can I use my strengths to attain my goal?”

The field of psychology was founded to try to help people with psychological problems. It’s no surprise, then, that psychology has become a problem-based discipline. If you find out what the patient’s problem is, then you can try to help them overcome it. While noble in intention, this mindset overlooks the positive aspects that are working in people’s lives. Ignoring the positive can lead to people feeling desperate, powerless and dependent upon a counselor.

Positive psychology is a relatively new methodology, starting in the late 1990s. Psychologists who subscribe to this methodology focus on what is best about people, based on an extensive study of character qualities common to all humans.

Research shows that positive people¹:

- Are healthier
- Recover more quickly from illness
- Have fewer physical complaints
- Live longer

In a coaching situation, a coach assesses the strengths of the client and then leverages those strengths to help the client achieve a stated goal. By applying positive psychology to personal health coaching, the emphasis shifts from “How do I fix what’s wrong with me?” to “How can I use my strengths to attain my goal?” Clients feel empowered, motivated and encouraged. They take from the coaching relationship a skill set they can use for the rest of their lives.

Key Factors in Engagement

With so many players in the field, defining “engagement” is as individualized as defining “health coach.” And because the definition of engagement is open to interpretation, understanding statistics around engagement can be challenging.

Health coaching companies regularly provide statistics on engagement, satisfaction and success, but these figures are based on

...engagement, in order to mean anything, needs to mean more than just showing up.

self-reported projections and not scientific measures, so results can be misleading. For instance, a 60-percent engagement rate sounds impressive, but does that mean 60 percent of the people who initially signed up for coaching logged onto a website at least once, or does it mean 60 percent who signed up achieved one or more of their health-related goals?

In a rapidly growing industry, a standardized definition will be hard to come by. What is clear is that engagement – in order to mean anything – needs to mean more than just showing up. It needs to mean actively participating in a process over a period of time to achieve stated goals.

Industry data thus far show that there are at least four key factors in engagement:

1. **Convenience:** In today's 24/7 world, health coaching needs to meet the client where they are. Offering e-mail interactions, scheduled online chat and telephone coaching enables clients to work with their coach the way that best fits their lifestyle.
2. **Increased interaction due to the convenience:** The more interaction an employee has with a coach, the greater likelihood of success.
3. **Motivation:** Interventions that are not staged to the "readiness to change" of an individual will be less likely to create engagement. Motivation is a key factor in successful behavior change. Techniques that assess human motivation and evaluate a person's readiness to change will increase adherence and goal realization.
4. **The Use of Positive Psychology:** Employees feel empowered when they can identify and leverage their strengths to change behavior and achieve goals. This approach removes the shame or stigma that may be associated with an unhealthy behavior or condition and provides tools for real change.

Consider these factors when looking for a health coaching company. Though not a magic formula, these criteria have been shown to increase true engagement. Employees who are engaged in their own wellness plans stand to modify unhealthy behaviors, achieve their goals, reduce the employer's healthcare burden and become more productive workers.

About LifeSynch

As behavior change experts, we are committed to changing behaviors to improve lives. For more than 20 years, our commitment to health and well-being has resulted in positive outcomes for employers, health plans, insurers and members. Our approach integrates the care of mind and body to enhance health and increase personal and workplace productivity. We collaborate with you, working with your existing vendors, processes and systems.

Our product portfolio includes Wellness solutions with personalized coaching and integrated online member portal, Employee Assistance/Work-Life programs, Managed Behavioral Health programs, Integrated Medical and Behavioral Healthcare, and Behavioral Health Pharmacy Management services.