

Resolving to Be Coached

The secret to sticking with your resolutions may be having a coach to help strategize and cheer you on.

By **Amitha Kalaichandran, M.D.**

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My teenage patient looked nervous as I reviewed her glucose readings from her glucometer and her glucose logbook, which people with diabetes use to track their blood-sugar test results. There were a lot of high levels — ranges in the 12's and 14's, when the goal was around 7 or 8. The peaks were mostly in the middle of the day and on weekends. (This was in Canada; blood glucose readings of 12 to 14 are equivalent to 216 to 250 mg/dL in the United States.)

“What do you usually eat at home?” I asked. She said that her mother was careful to make her a breakfast that balanced carbohydrates with protein. Her dinners were similar.

“What do you usually eat at lunch?” I asked. My patient started tearing up. She ate whatever her friends were eating in her high school's cafeteria that day — like spaghetti, hamburgers or pizza, and something like a cupcake for dessert. This was probably what led to her readings being so high.

She had met with diabetes educators before, and she knew what uncontrolled glucose does to a person with diabetes, from speeding up nerve damage in the feet to hastening blood vessel damage in the back of the eyes and the kidneys, to increasing her risk of heart disease.

I knew she could have told me all of that, so lecturing her wasn't going to help.

Instead my patient needed empathy and the tools to help her make healthier decisions, and part of that required understanding what was important to her, specifically “fitting in” with her friends in high school, the ones who didn't have a chronic disease. It also would have involved helping her find the motivation within herself to make the change.

But my skill set for helping her was limited, especially on top of everything else I had to cover within our allotted time of 45 minutes.

Research suggests that behavioral and lifestyle factors are a big part of what contributes to chronic disease. In medical training, we learn a lot about the body and how to prevent and treat disease, but little about how we can motivate a patient to change old habits or even stick with a current management plan.

It struck me that what my patient really needed was a coach. At this time of year when many of us have made resolutions to get healthier, working with a health coach might be one way to reach those goals.

A health coach is someone trained in behavior change, who primarily uses an interview style called “motivational interviewing” to help patients see their ability to make change. While some may have clinical training in fields like nursing or medicine, they hail from a wide variety of disciplines or train in health coaching as a secondary career.

As a relatively young field, it's still finding its footing — for instance, a systematic review found that the definitions of “health coaching” varied widely, though the authors recommended that health coaches take a patient-centered approach to help with goal setting while encouraging self-discovery and accountability.

The evidence that health coaching may spur general lifestyle changes is mounting. A 2018 study looked at clinical trials for coaching for nutrition and weight management and found that over 80 percent of these studies found improvement. And a 2017 study found that coaching can lead to increased physical activity in older adults. Studies suggest that health coaching may also provide benefits for conditions such as obesity and diabetes as well as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, chronic pain, hypertension and high cholesterol. A recent review found that health coaching can improve quality of life and reduce hospital admissions among patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and it may help patients to become more engaged in the health care system.

It may even improve health outcomes through encouraging patient adherence to medication.

“Health coaching recognizes that we cannot help people by expecting them to act if that person is not ready to act,” said Leila Finn, a health coach based in Atlanta. “We help people take big goals and break them down into accessible, bite-size pieces — not by telling clients what to do but by helping clients figure out what will work for them.”

Health coaching gets to the heart of what providing good health care is about: acceptance, partnership, compassion, and helping patients feel respected and understood.

Though my clinical training is in pediatric medicine, inspired by what I had read, I recently completed a certificate in health coaching myself. The experience was eye-opening and humbling. I learned new ways of communicating with my patients, specifically ways to encourage them to see their own ability to make lifestyle changes while setting manageable goals. I also learned ways to cheer them on when they reach their goals, without shaming them if they relapse: Both pieces are critical to the process of making sustainable change.

While research is beginning to show the value of health coaching, the principles of communicating with the intent to inspire and motivate are transferable to all health professions — and could reap dividends if taught early on in the training of nursing students, medical students, pharmacy students, and other allied health professionals.

And when I think back to my teenage patient with diabetes, while I was empathetic, that was only half of the solution. The second half could have involved coaching her to see which small changes she could begin to make moving forward. I'm hoping that choosing my words more effectively, even within the pressures of time, may make all the difference for my other patients.

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