

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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Trying to Break Unhealthy Habits? There's a Coach for That

Some research suggests wellness coaching can help people change behaviors—at least in the short term



Sara Link is a certified wellness coach at the Mayo Clinic Healthy Living Program in Rochester, Minn. PHOTO: GOSHA WEIVODA/MAYO CLINIC

By **BARBARA SADICK**

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Changing unhealthy habits is hard, doctors say. But with Americans suffering from chronic disease in epidemic proportions, a big push is under way to get more individuals to do just that.

Large employers, insurers, health-care systems and other organizations are increasingly turning to “wellness coaches” to motivate people to adopt healthier lifestyles.

These programs typically include counseling to get patients to understand how behavior affects health, along with techniques such as meditation and goal-setting to help individuals make needed changes and stay on course.

It's all part of a broader shift within the health-care industry toward keeping people well instead of simply treating them when they're sick. The stakes are high: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calls lifestyle-related chronic disease such as obesity, Type 2 diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease the greatest health challenge of the 21st century. The CDC estimates that half of all adults in the U.S., or 117 million people, had one or more chronic health condition in 2012, accounting for 86% of all health-care spending.

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“Changing health behaviors is challenging,” but wellness coaching “can help patients identify manageable ways to improve them,” says Russell S. Phillips, director of the Center for Primary Care at Harvard Medical School.

Does it work?

Based on the number of approved programs that have gone through a review process, the National Consortium for

Credentialing Health and Wellness Coaches estimates that there are 15,000 to 20,000 wellness coaches in the U.S.

Although wellness coaching is a relatively new field, some recent research suggests that it does work—at least in the short term.

A Mayo Clinic study of 100 participants who worked with a wellness coach found that a majority had lost weight, improved nutritional habits and increased their physical activity by the end of the 12-week program. While there was some slippage in healthy behaviors at a three-month follow-up, the participants were still in better shape than before the coaching started, the study found.

““Many people can implement positive lifestyle changes, but maintaining change over time is extremely difficult,” says Matthew M. Clark, a clinical psychologist at Mayo Clinic and the lead author of the study. “This finding highlights the importance of ongoing strategies and support for positive lifestyle changes.”

In the sessions, participants worked one-on-one with a coach to create a vision for wellness and to design a strategy to reach those goals. “As behavior changes, attitude changes, and as attitude changes, behavior changes,” says Kristin Vickers Douglas, medical director of wellness coaching at the clinic.

Kate Lorig, professor and director of the Patient Education Research Center at the Stanford School of Medicine, develops programs to help people with chronic diseases make health changes.

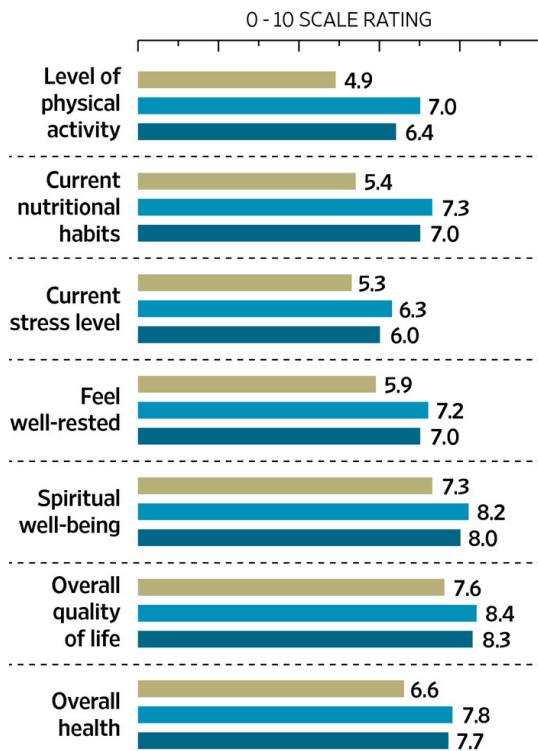
Guiding Hand

Participants in a Mayo Clinic study reported improvements in health behaviors after 12 weeks of one-on-one wellness coaching

■ Baseline

■ After 12 weeks of coaching

■ Three months after program's end



Note: Statistical comparisons are from baseline to week 12 of coaching program, and baseline to three months after program's end

Source: American Journal of Health Promotion, 2015

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The key, Dr. Lorig says, “is systematically giving people the confidence that they can do something and succeed.”

Maria Mendez Arsitz of Fort Worth, Texas, who has Type 2 diabetes, enrolled in one of the Stanford courses earlier this year. She learned about how the disease works and the risk factors, such as obesity, for developing diabetes. She also began to engage in aerobic exercises like brisk walking to lower her blood glucose and blood pressure and improve her cholesterol levels, and she added strength-training exercises to make her body more sensitive to insulin and to lower her blood glucose.

“The small goals I made became habits,” she says.

Training the brain

Patients with lifestyle-related diseases aren't the only ones trying wellness coaching.

Carissa Tardiff, a 31-year-old business professional from Philadelphia, was diagnosed in 2010 with sarcoidosis, an autoimmune disease. Feeling tired, unfocused and unwell, she turned to a wellness-coaching program at Mayo Clinic's Healthy Living Center.

The two day session, which cost \$750 and consisted of one-on-one coaching, featured sessions on the “art of self-compassion” and “training your brain for happiness,” as well as yoga, meditation and other relaxation techniques. She spent time with a neuroscientist who educated her about how the brain works.

PREVIOUSLY IN HEALTH CARE

- Are Antibacterial Soaps Safe?
- The Tough New Family Talk: Our Genes
- How to Take Charge of Your Medical Records
- E-Cigarettes and Quitting Smoking
- Is Being Overweight Good for You?

Her coaches encouraged her to exercise to alleviate stress. Now she goes to the gym five days a week and meditates for 15 minutes every day. She says she no longer has trouble breathing, sleeping or controlling her intake of food, and she can think and communicate more clearly.

Ms. Tardiff says she continues to try to use mindfulness to quiet her mind and focus on the present. “I want to learn from the past and think about the future, but what I really want is to master being in the present, and I practice and practice to do that every day,” says Ms. Tardiff.

Ms. Sadick is a writer in New York. Email her at reports@wsj.com.

Corrections & Amplifications:

An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of Kristin Vickers Douglas, medical director of wellness coaching at Mayo Clinic. (Sept. 28, 2016)