

In their corner: Health coaches support consumer efforts to alter behavior

The nascent field of coaching gives plans an alternative method to encourage positive habits such as weight and stress management

BY TRACEY WALKER

Aug 1, 2006

When his daughter was born seven years ago, Dan Schach had been smoking and chewing tobacco for 32 years. He knew then that it was time to make a lifestyle change.



"I was really concerned about getting cancer," says Schach, a 50-year-old shuttle bus driver for Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) in Portland. "I wanted to make sure I saw my daughter graduate from high school and become a young woman."

With the help of the OHSU Health Management Services (HMS) and a nurse coach, Schach was able to quit tobacco.

Through motivational interviewing (see sidebar) and lifestyle coaching techniques, Schach's OHSU HMS nurse coach Laura Cirotski, RN-BSN, empowered him to make changes that were relatively simple, but had a long-term impact on his health.

"I am much healthier now and have more energy," Schach says.

Health coaching has kept Schach aware of other health issues, as well, such as managing stress, exercising and maintaining a healthy diet.

"Coaching Dan over the years has been very gratifying," says Cirotski. "He's made the positive lifestyle changes and maintained them over many years."

Health coaching is a high-touch service increasingly being offered by health plans to help change the behavior of individuals who, like Schach, know what lifestyle or other behavior changes they need to improve in the areas of nutrition, smoking cessation, sleep, weight management and stress management.

"Health coaching hasn't been universally defined, and there are no set standards or criteria," according to Susan Butterworth, PhD, director of OHSU HMS. "However, in the context of

disease management, we can say that health coaching is a service in which providers facilitate participants in changing lifestyle-related behaviors for improved health and quality of life, or re-establishing and attaining health-promotion goals," she says.

In addition, health coaching emphasizes efforts to provide a behavioral intervention versus simply providing information," explains Butterworth.

Richard Safeer, MD, FAAFP, medical director, preventive medicine at CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield, agrees. "Health plans are starting to realize that they can't just tell members what they should do to stay healthy; they need to work with members to identify their barriers to achieving ultimate health—that's where health coaching comes in," Dr. Safeer says.

The advent of consumer-directed care has created a favorable environment for health coaching, says Phil Micali, CEO and founder of New York-based bWell International, a provider of consumer-directed health plan products and consulting services. "Formerly, managed care focused on influencing provider behavior, not consumer behavior," he says. "We are seeing a significant tide change with the focus on consumer health literacy and 'numeracy'—that is, understanding the economics of healthcare and wellness. Health coaching is the antidote that is necessary to transform consumers from healthcare users into healthcare consumers."

The interest in health coaching is driven by purchasers' desire to lower medical benefit cost through wellness and disease management, according to Steve Richter, senior vice president at Keenan & Associates, Keenan HealthCare division. "This means facilitating behavior change in consumers who know what lifestyle or other behavior changes they need to make, but have not followed through," Richter says.

HEALTH COACHING UP CLOSE

Health coaching can include disease management, case management, utilization review and generally applying evidence-based medicine guidelines to care delivery, according to Micali.

Because of the strong imperative to provide behavior modification interventions, health coaching recently has gained great popularity because of the ability to address multiple behaviors, health risks and self-management of illness in a cost-effective manner, Butterworth says.

"If we can encourage people to make healthier lifestyle choices and adhere to their treatment plans by facilitating self-care competencies, the outcomes include reduced health risks and better self-management of chronic conditions," she says.

OHSU HMS offers health coaching through a multidisciplinary group, including nurses, dietitians and other health promotion specialists, who spend time with individuals primarily by telephone.

"During these interactions, the health coach focuses on identifying both the physical and mental obstacles that prevent members from taking charge of their health and better managing their chronic conditions," says Jay Krueger, senior vice president of business strategy, APS Healthcare, a specialty healthcare company based in Silver Spring, Md., which bundles health coaching into its disease management program.

The number of health coaching sessions may vary on the program being pursued, Micali says. "Someone who wants to significantly change diet and exercise to address obesity may require a high frequency of sessions and a long duration, given that eating habits can be very slow to combat," he says.

HOW MEMBERS RESPOND

Health coaching is fairly intensive and not necessary for every member, according to Butterworth. "The most cost-effective way to administer all health promotion and disease management interventions is to identify members/employees at greatest risk and stratify them by need for varying the intensity of services," she says.

Candidates for health coaching tend to respond positively because health coaches act as an advocate, according to Krueger. "Health coaches provide a supportive environment to help members obtain positive healthcare results that are sustainable over time," he says. "Individuals who are involved in their care make better decisions and are more able to engage their physicians and other support resources in managing their care."

In addition, many health coaching programs offer consumers financial incentives to participate, Micali says.

CIGNA has found that the majority of individuals respond positively to outreach from a health coach, according to Daniel L. Ober, DO, medical senior director, health advocacy and information at CIGNA. "Some may not be aware of their health risks or have information to help them incorporate changes or follow a doctor's recommendations," Dr. Ober says. "Others find it helpful in setting goals and like the accountability of knowing their health coach will be calling them."

CIGNA has formed CareAllies Health Coach program that targets those who are at higher risk for future healthcare problems, based on their responses to a health risk assessment. "We are focusing on consumers as the end-users of our clinical management and health advocacy services," Dr. Ober says. When a CIGNA HealthCare medical plan is offered by a plan sponsor, CIGNA provides clinical management and health coaching programs, which include disease management programs, a 24-hour health information line and a health coaching program.

"CareAllies provides plan sponsors with these programs when an employer wants to offer a consistent set of clinical management and health coaching programs across their entire workforce, whether or not they have an underlying CIGNA medical plan," Dr. Ober explains.


The CareAllies team averages about two health coaches per 1,000 members, along with a team of health advisors, level-of-care nurses, nutritionists, lifestyle management specialists, a dedicated health coach medical director, multiple specialty physicians and a pharmacist. The number of health coaches may be adjusted to meet volumes and utilization and demand, says Dr. Ober.

"Our health coach program is individualized, dependent on the member's need," Dr. Ober says. "Attempting to make dietary or physical activity changes, for many individuals, requires a series of small steps over several months."

Aetna offers a Wellness Counseling service that looks at health risk assessment data and risk-stratifies members, according to Anthony Rubino, product specialist for the Member Advantage Programs, and subject matter expert for the Aetna Healthy Body, Healthy Weight, and Wellness Counseling. The Wellness Counseling service costs 60 cents per-member per-month (PMPM) and the Aetna Healthy Body, Healthy Weight program costs \$1 PMPM. "The Wellness Counseling services lower modifiable risk factors, identify candidates for disease and case management programs earlier, educate about Aetna consumerism tools and support positive health-related behavior change," Rubino says.

Wellness Counseling nurses provide outreach to members if they are at risk for a number of conditions. "This type of early intervention has been shown to identify at-risk members early and to manage a condition early before the condition becomes chronic or severe," Rubino says.

CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield is launching a health risk assessment tool "MyHealthProfile" this month and a "Healthy Lifestyle Coaching" health coaching service for smoking cessation, exercise participation, as well as weight and stress management from Healthways this October, according to Dr. Safeer. "Our health coaches will not be spending time telling participants that smoking is bad for you or for your lungs—which offers a lower probability of being effective. Instead, we will partner with the participant to take into account their individual situation when approaching their unhealthy behavior," he says.



COACHING COMPONENT

Motivation to change

With all the public health messages in the media today, for the most part, people know what they should be doing for their health. They shouldn't be smoking or eating fatty foods, they should be getting enough sleep and taking their medications. But, knowing it doesn't translate into being motivated or able to do it.

Motivational interviewing (MI), a client-centered counseling style for eliciting behavior change by helping clients to explore and resolve ambivalence, is a key technique used in health coaching.

"Through MI, a health coach can determine what specific risk factors a member may have identified, to what extent he/she is 'ready to make changes' and what exactly is driving the member to make the necessary changes to improve his/her overall health," according to Daniel L. Ober, DO, medical senior director, health advocacy and information at CIGNA. "It is important to acknowledge that motivational interviewing is participant-centered, directive and involves unconditional positive regard for the individual," Dr. Ober says.

MI is an important tool for health coaches at APS Healthcare, a specialty healthcare company in Silver Spring, Md. "In motivational interviewing, health coaches follow four principles, which are expressing empathy, developing discrepancy, rolling with resistance and supporting self-efficacy," explains Jay Krueger, APS' senior vice president of business strategy. "Our health coaches also as-

sess the member's lifestyle and listen for positive and negative behaviors that members have during a typical day.

According to Susan Butterworth, PhD, director of Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) Health Management Services (HMS), MI was originally developed for addictions counseling by Bill Miller and Steve Rollnick in the 1980s. HMS has been offering MI-based health coaching services since 2000. Its staff boasts coaches who have all been rated as proficient in MI and three MI trainers who trained directly under the co-founders of this technique.

"Not only has MI been shown to be effective for treating addictions, but the literature also documents successful MI interventions in promoting physical activity, improving nutritional habits, encouraging medication adherence and managing chronic conditions such as hypertension, high cholesterol, obesity and diabetes," Butterworth says.

Characteristics of the MI technique make it particularly suitable for use in a DM program, says Butterworth.

- It is most effective when implemented with members/employees who are considered difficult; that is, reluctant to change, stuck or ambivalent about changing their behavior.

- It has been found to be efficacious in small doses.

- It has been found to work across gender, age, cultural and socioeconomic boundaries.

- It works well in conjunction with other traditional programs and interventions.

—Tracey Walker

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