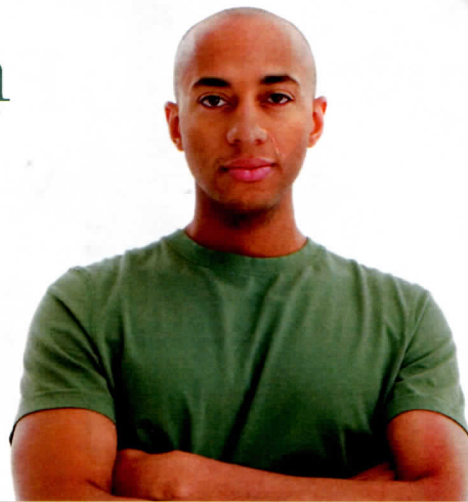


A Health Coach Can Bring Out Your Best

Pros in this new field use the science of behavior change to help healthier habits become reality. That can be a tough thing to do by yourself.



Trying to lose weight, exercise more, or change your lifestyle to reduce your risk for disease can be tough to do on your own with lasting results. Enter the health coach. This new breed of expert can help you adapt different behaviors and make them lifelong habits.

Health coaches differ from life coaches, personal trainers, or therapists. According to the Institute of Coaching at McLean Hospital (a Harvard affiliate in Boston), they use science-based techniques to provide structure and accountability. They work to enhance your motivation, self-confidence, and self-regulation.

With a health coach's guidance, you won't just target the lifestyle changes you need to make. You'll learn how to make them sustainable.

How effective are health coaches? To find out, a study in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* followed 154 people older than 45 with one or more risk factors for heart disease, such as diabetes or high blood pressure. Patients who worked with a health coach reduced their risk for heart disease more than those who didn't.

During the 10-month study, health coach participants lost more weight and exercised at least one more day a week than patients who didn't get coaching. Patients with coaches also

cut their weight, "bad" cholesterol, and blood pressure significantly more.

Habit Change Hardwiring

A health coach can help you clarify your health goals, identify three to five behaviors to target, and develop personal strategies to accomplish them. As you continue coaching sessions, you'll focus on your lifestyle and self-care.

Such intense scrutiny helps because old health habits can be hard to break. They're part of your brain's hardwiring.

When you form a habit—watching TV every night after dinner, for example—a neural network develops, akin to a trench in your brain. The Institute of Coaching says forging a new habit—such as exercising as you watch TV or taking a walk every night after dinner—requires a new neural network. That takes effort and motivation.

With time, coaching, and consistency, the new neural network becomes dominant. The new habit becomes second nature and the old habit fades away. Instead of thinking, "I'm tired. Maybe I'll skip my walk tonight," for example, you'll look forward to your post-dinner stroll. You'll make sure it gets done, regardless of your feelings or the weather.

Choosing a Coach

Health coaches typically charge about \$60 to \$100 an hour. In the start-up phase, you can expect to meet two or three times in a month to lay the groundwork for your plan. After that, you may meet monthly for up to a year.

Health coaching can be done in person and via email. The goal is to get you on your own feet.

If you think a health coach might be right for you, do some homework:

- **Ask if the coach is certified by a credentialed training program.**

The U.S. has three: Wellcoaches, which is endorsed by the American College of Sports Medicine; the Integrative Health Coach Professional Training Program at Duke University; and the University of Minnesota Certificate in Integrative Therapies & Healing Practices. Both Duke (www.dukeintegrativehealthcoach.org) and Wellcoaches (www.wellcoaches.com) offer online "find a coach" services.

- **Comparison shop.** Coaches should be able to tell you what they do, how their methods work, and why they're successful.

- **Get references.** Call past clients to find out how helpful the coach was.

□ By Sandra Gordon, a feature writer for *Vitality*. For more information, visit www.instituteofcoaching.org.