

# The ‘Exercise is Medicine’ Advantage

By Laura Klein, Beth Frates and Margaret Moore

How can you leverage the ACSM/AMA “Exercise is Medicine” initiative most effectively? We asked Laura Klein, the wellness director of the Thoreau Club, in Concord, Massachusetts; Beth Frates, M.D., a clinical instructor at the Harvard Medical School and assistant director of education at the Institute of Lifestyle Medicine; and Margaret Moore, CEO of the Wellcoaches Corporation, in Wellesley, Massachusetts.



#### Tap the expertise of a fitness or wellness coach.

The combination of professional coaching skills and a knowledge of clinical exercise physiology has created a new generation of certified fitness and wellness coaches. Not only are these individuals skilled at helping people build and sustain healthy lifestyles, but physicians respect their command of exercise science and their ability to help clients make lasting changes.

#### Build trusting, collaborative relationships with physicians.

Coaches promise to be an important bridge between the club and physician to implement Exercise is Medicine. To build solid relationships, communicate openly with doctors and provide detailed information about what you have to offer—e.g., the equipment you have, the credentials of your fitness professionals and coaches, the programs you offer for people who are sedentary and have health risks, etc. Describe the kind of fitness evaluations you conduct, and how you plan to deliver concise feedback on patient progress. A short summary of a patient’s fitness or wellness plan and goals, including motivators, strengths, and challenges is valuable. Detailed feedback data to physicians should include the reason for referral, such as reducing BMI, waist circumference, blood pressure, and heart rate for someone who is overweight and hypertensive.

#### Help physicians to encourage patients to exercise.

Unfortunately, in medical school, students don’t learn about exercise or how to help patients pursue healthy lifestyles. In view of this, clubs and coaches should seize the opportunity to teach physicians about exercise, about the role of coaches and clubs in lifestyle change,

and about how they can best use short office visits with their patients to inspire and motivate them to get fit. Beyond that, offering trial club memberships and coaching programs to physicians and their staff will help them to improve their own lifestyles.

**Cultivate your market, casting a wide net.** In addition to physicians, reach out to other traditional and alternative healthcare providers, including chiropractors, acupuncturists, and sports and rehabilitation therapists. Set up fact-finding meetings with providers to discover how you can help. Offer memberships and programs that meet the needs of their patients—e.g., a club coaching membership that includes a wellness coaching program for exercise “contemplators”; a short-term membership for first-time exercisers; prevention programs or lectures for patients with risk factors; rehabilitation programs, etc.

**Learn from success stories.** For example, The Thoreau Club partnered with a local hospital to deliver its Prelude program, first to the hospital’s employees and, later, to its patients. This eight-week introductory membership includes weekly sessions with a wellness coach to pursue goals; personal training sessions; and nutrition consultations. On-site fitness programs are offered at the hospital to eliminate the intimidation some feel when joining a club, while, at the same time, reinforcing the club’s brand. Hospital clinicians also offer presentations to club members on a variety of prevention and healthcare topics. —

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