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Wellness Coaching: Benefits for Cancer Survivors

“With appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities as wellness coaches, oncology nurses can be at the forefront of helping cancer survivors make lasting positive health changes.”

Wellness coaches are credentialed health, fitness, and mental health professionals trained to coach individuals on evidence-based areas of wellness, including physical activity, nutrition, weight, stress, and life satisfaction. Wellness coaching is endorsed and promoted by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), and is offered by Wellcoaches Corporation (www.wellcoaches.com). Individuals hire wellness coaches to help them make positive health-related behavior changes. Certified wellness coaches include nurses, physicians, social workers, and counselors who work with clients in academic centers, health facilities, and private practices. Wellness coaching can be conducted in person, over the telephone, via the Web (eg, Skype), or using a combination of these.

A wellness coach creates an environment of openness and acceptance to help the client create a vision for his or her health. The coach guides the client in meaningful dialogue to focus on what matters the most for that individual. From there, the coach works with the client to facilitate the client's creation of realistic goals to achieve the wellness vision. The coach respects and appreciates that the client is his or her own expert. By engaging the client in discussing his or her priorities, strengths, barriers, and motivators, the likelihood for a doable and sustainable health vision is increased. Wellness coaches employ active listening and appreciative inquiry to establish trust and facilitate goal planning. Coaching sessions typically last for 30 minutes, with an initial 60- or 90-minute session to co-create a wellness vision with the client. The coach and client can meet weekly by phone or in person, with e-mail or telephone contact in between sessions as needed. The length of coaching can be 6 weeks or longer, depending on the client's goals and needs, with periodic booster sessions as needed.

Recently, 30 cancer survivors were enrolled in a research study where they received wellness coaching over the telephone by a certified ACSM Health Fitness Specialist and Wellcoach who was a breast cancer survivor (<http://iji.cgpublisher.com/product/pub.88/prod.924>). The survivors received six wellness

coaching sessions over a 3-month period. While the initial session lasted for 90 minutes, subsequent telephone sessions were between 30 and 40 minutes. Survivors completed numerous questionnaires related to their health, physical activity, and quality of life. At the conclusion of the 3-month study, there were significant improvements in the survivors' quality of life, along with a decrease in depression, anxiety, and an improvement in exercise. Self-reported health behaviors also showed an increase in servings of fruit and vegetables, physical activity, and reduced weight, all of which were sustained or improved 1 year after the program ended. While these positive changes showed a slight decline after the 1-year mark without the wellness coaching, none of the changes returned to the pre-intervention level of assessment.

This study is of interest to oncology nurses for several reasons. With the growing number of cancer survivors, approaches to keeping them engaged in maintaining good health are needed. Use of a telephone, along with excellent listening and coaching skills, are readily employable by nurses. With appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities as wellness coaches, oncology nurses can be at the forefront of helping cancer survivors make lasting positive health changes. Wellness coaching is not an approach taught in nursing school, and removing our 'expert' hat and relinquishing the role of expert to the patient can be difficult for us. As nurses, we are excellent listeners, and wellness coaching teaches us to listen to our patients by holding up a mirror to them, so they see a reflection of themselves, their values, and their preferences. Oncology nurses interested in training and certification for wellness coaching can visit the Wellcoaches Website at www.wellcoaches.com. **Onc**

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