FACILITATING CHANGE
When Change Is Hard
The Work of Professional Health & Wellness Coaches

BY MARGARET MOORE, MBA

A common lament of my coaching clients when they engage me to re-engineer their lifestyles is that they struggle with an unsolved mystery along the lines of, “I know what I need to do and I don’t get why I don’t do it.” People often spend decades in a stuck stage that I call chronic contemplation in one or more domains in life, whether it’s managing stress and frenzy, getting and staying fit, listening more and talking less in relationships, or losing weight for good.

What I’ve learned from my biggest hero in the science of adult development and coaching, Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan, is that each of us has a worldview, a box of assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives we live in, which constrains our awareness and possibilities. A chronic health and wellness challenge is sending us a message — calling for us to grow into a bigger worldview, getting outside and beyond our boxes. The box could be: “I can lose weight but I regain all of it and more” or “I don’t have time to exercise.”

The brain has no roadmap for “I am able to lose weight and keep it off” or “I schedule exercise into my calendar as a priority because I am far more energetic, productive, and creative.”

How do professional coaches or health professionals deploying basic coaching skills help people get beyond their worldviews, outside their boxes to build a new roadmap? When you think about the biology of how the brain learns, you can imagine that people need to build new networks in their brains to support a new and bigger worldview. Now neuroscientists are exploring the biological processes of neuroplasticity, the generation of new neural connections and integrated brain-wide networks that undergird the formation of new habits and the cognitive and emotional mindsets needed to sustain them.

What are the conditions that enable people to create robust neural networks and change for good? Professional coaches are passionate about discovering and enabling these conditions so that they can help their clients make sustainable change in mindset and behavior. Well-trained coaches draw on a rich science-based toolbox for facilitating lasting change. Here’s a sample of how coaches facilitate change.

MINDFUL ATTENTION
A calm, warm coaching session enables a client to experience mindful, focused attention on his personal health and well-being. The coaching dynamic enhances self-awareness by quieting a client’s emotional frenzy for a short time, tuning out distractions, eliciting positive emotions about what’s going well, and enabling a curious and engaged inquiry into “what’s really going on here?” Coaching helps clients demystify a complex process of habits of mind and action. The first ah-hahs come from new awareness of patterns of emotions, thoughts, and action, followed by imagining new possibilities. Recently a case manager in a coach-training workshop shared that coaches help patients see windows instead of walls. It’s likely that a calm, mindful space designed to generate self-awareness and new ideas helps new connections to form in the brain.
SELF-ACCEPTANCE

Negative emotions narrow the brain’s focus and attention, decrease open-mindedness, and impair creativity, problem-solving, and strategic thinking. Hence, feeling badly about past behaviors and failures restricts the brain’s resources for problem solving and change even before first steps are taken. Creative ideas depend on a good dose of positive emotions lighting up the brain, improving access to memory as well as cognitive agility. A nonjudgmental and empathetic coaching dynamic helps clients let go of the weight of self-judgment and affirm the lessons of the past, so they are more hopeful about proceeding to make changes.

AUTONOMOUS MOTIVATION

Autonomous motivation (I want to do this because it’s good for me and my future, not because someone else wants me to do it) is the type of motivation that enables sustained weight loss at two years. Autonomy is a core human drive; we are wired to dislike being told what to do. People (all ages) perform best when they are free to make an autonomous choice. This is good news because people also assume personal responsibility for their health when they act autonomously. Unfortunately our health care system, including case management, is designed to be top-down, authority-led, putting the patient in the passenger seat while a healthcare provider sits in the driver’s seat determining the agenda and delivering advice and education, depriving a patient the opportunity to take charge and drill down to find a heartfelt source of motivation. To support autonomy coaches “get out of sales and get into fishing” by asking open questions without judgmental expectations. Coaches engage in undistracted listening and reflecting with an open, mindful, and curious mindset, rather than preaching and prescribing which shuts down autonomy and often triggers resistance. Clients are taken aback when they connect for the first time with their own heartfelt desire for change – it’s not about pounds on a scale, it’s about unleashing their life force, allowing them to make a bigger impact on their worlds.

SELF-EFFICACY

“Whether you think you can, or think you can’t, you are right.”

Henry Ford

Self-efficacy, one’s confidence or belief in one’s ability to be successful, is a co-dependent companion of motivation: both are essential for successful change. The sparkle of motivation fades quickly if confidence in reaching one’s goals falls short. Fortunately there are many roads to building self-efficacy. Coaches help clients identify and deploy strengths and talents, especially those used in other life domains such as work. Often people are renowned for certain skills, for example persistence or reliability in their jobs, and have never considered transferring these skills to their personal well-being. Doing so can lead to breakthroughs, as they tap into existing brain wiring for success.

Barbara Fredrickson, a prominent social psychologist at UNC-Chapel Hill, has unraveled the biology of positive emotions over the past 20 years, and has shown that the main mediator of resilience is the level of positive emotions summoned in a time of stress, setback, or adversity. Surprisingly, the level of negative emotions is not a determining factor; people with high levels of negativity are resilient if they have high levels of positivity. Helping clients amplify sources of positive emotions in their lives not only builds confidence, it’s fun to coach on.

The field of hope psychology has shown that success increases with higher levels of hope, and has focused on what builds hope, which includes setting inspiring goals and identifying multiple pathways to reach them. It’s important to adopt a “scientist” mindset and test or experiment with several options in
order to find and settle on one’s unique formula.

While goal-setting researchers have taught us that ambitious goals are more engaging and lead to higher performance than more modest goals, a moderating factor is their impact on confidence. Too-challenging goals can lead to stress and anxiety, damage confidence, and arrest interest in continuation. It’s important to find the right balance of “stretch,” which is engaging and doesn’t jeopardize confidence. There is great power in succeeding at small goals because it builds self-efficacy and keeps motivation fired up as small benefits are savored. When it comes to long-term weight loss, the tortoise is ultimately more successful than the hare. It seems likely that the biological limits of adding new connections in the brain favor a slow and steady pace.

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PROCESS OF CHANGING MINDSET AND BEHAVIOR

Now that we have cultivated mindful self-reflection, self-acceptance, and developed self-motivation and self-efficacy, we have the foundation needed for a successful change process. Lasting change depends upon a change of mindset (I love being fit and don’t want to go back to my old sedentary ways) together with behavior change (I consistently do four 30-minute workouts weekly). It takes months of experimenting with goals, practicing, developing skills, gaining insights, bouncing back from setbacks, and recharging motivation and confidence, in order to lay down a lasting brain network that can counter the chaos of everyday life.

Coaching sessions at their best each generate small shifts in mindset as clients adopt new perspectives, question their assumptions, see new possibilities, and find new meanings for their experiences. A surprise question or observation can open a client’s mind and lead to a new insight that likely creates new neuronal connections needed to support lasting change. Harbors of the lessons from goal performance, particularly setbacks and challenges, are rich ground for new insights. There are no “failures” in this process, only opportunities to grow and learn.

Last for now, in the early stages of change, accountability between a client and coach is a key success factor. There are many engaging methods of scheduling and follow-up to choose from—reminders, written progress reports, coaching sessions, phone/email check-ins, and behavioral “apps.”

The best rationale for professional coaches and case managers to get out of the driver’s seat and into the passenger seat is that so long as we are driving, no new connections and networks are forming in the brains of our clients. In fact when we take control of the steering wheel and issue instructions and advice, not only are we depriving people of the autonomy and confidence they need to self-direct their own neuroplasticity, they may even resist our good intentions.

What can you do with your next client or patient to help her to think outside her box, and support her brain to learn and grow?

About the Author
Margaret Moore/Coach Meg, MBA, is the Founder & CEO of Wellcoaches Corporation, a “School of Coaching” for health professionals, and strategic partner of the American College of Sports Medicine. She is Co-Director of the Institute of Coaching, McLean Hospital, an affiliate of Harvard Medical School and co-directs the annual Coaching in Leadership & Healthcare Conference offered by Harvard Medical School. She co-authored the ACSM-endorsed Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins Coaching Psychology Manual, the first coaching textbook in health care and the Harvard Health Book published by Harlequin: Organize Your Mind, Organize Your Life, translating the science of brain organization into self-coaching solutions. This article also draws from the first chapter on coaching in a medical textbook to be published in late 2012, Encyclopedia of Lifestyle Medicine & Health.