

Health Coaching 101

WHAT IS HEALTH COACHING?

Health coaches specialize in behavior change. They support their clients in finding their own strategies and motivation for change, overcoming obstacles, and implementing protocols that have either been prescribed by a clinician or nutritionist/dietitian or that the client has chosen to implement on their own.

Health coaches don't operate on the "expert model" that's so common in healthcare. They don't lecture, prescribe, or simply dispense advice. Instead, they empower others to make the choice for health, including healthier behaviors, for themselves.

HOW CAN HEALTH COACHES HELP?

The chronic disease epidemic is spreading. Six out of 10 adults in the United States have a chronic disease, and four in 10 have two or more conditions. The majority of those chronic illnesses are caused by diet, lifestyle, and behavior—not genetics. Changing those lifestyle factors has the potential to prevent and reverse chronic disease on a large scale. With chronic illness, most care is self-care.

Even so, research shows us that change is difficult. In fact, only 6 percent of Americans engage in the top five health behaviors. There's a lot of room for improvement, but that's where health coaches come in.

Health coaches work directly with their clients to support them as they embrace those healthy lifestyle strategies. If a practitioner prescribes a treatment protocol for a patient, health coaches can, through their support, improve the patient's adherence to the treatment plan and goals.

That's not the only benefit health coaches bring practitioners. They act as a liaison between the clinician and the patient, often improving the doctor-patient relationship in the process. Through their support, health coaches also reduce practitioners' stress levels and their time requirements for each patient—and that's a big deal when the average doctor only has around 10 to 12 minutes to spend with each patient. Health coaches can also bring in more revenue for clinicians by working collaboratively as part of their practice.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS HEALTH COACHING?

In short, it's extremely effective. Health coaching has been shown to:

- **Improve weight loss** and help people maintain a lower weight for longer
- Lead to **faster reduction of blood sugar levels** in diabetic patients
- **Lower total cholesterol levels** in people with coronary heart disease
- Lessen feelings of depression and **improve overall quality of life**
- Encourage people to **stick with the changes** they've made long term

HOW ARE HEALTH COACHES TRAINED?

Health coaching is a relatively new profession, and the practice continues to grow and mature. Because of that, there's a wide variety in the quality and depth of the available health coach training programs out there.

But all that's changing. Through a partnership with the National Board of Medical Examiners, NBHWC (the National Board for Health & Wellness Coaching) has developed rigorous standards for health coach education and training. Health coaches who have mastered a specific set of practical skills, logged at least 50 practice coaching sessions with clients, and passed a certifying exam can earn the NBC-HWC (National Board Certified-Health and Wellness Coach) certification.

The best-trained health coaches out there will be NBC-HWC certified or have attended schools that meet or exceed NBHWC standards, such as the ADAPT Health Coach Training Program.

WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF PRACTICE OF A HEALTH COACH?

The role of a health coach is centered on supporting his or her clients' efforts to grow and change. The health coach's main focus is on helping others reach their self-developed health goals.

Health coaches:

- Help clients develop their own health goals and action steps based on treatment plans from practitioners
- Encourage clients to mobilize their own insight, internal strengths, and external resources to make sustainable, healthy changes
- Work with individuals or groups to facilitate the behavior change process
- Act as accountability partners to help clients reach their health goals

Health coaches do not diagnose conditions, prescribe treatments, or provide psychological therapeutic interventions. They may provide expert guidance in areas in which they hold active, nationally recognized credentials and may offer resources from nationally recognized authorities.

HOW DO HEALTH COACHES AND CLINICIANS COLLABORATE TO IMPROVE PATIENT OUTCOMES?

Alongside their work supporting clients, health coaches excel at supporting practitioners too. While clinicians focus on diagnosing, testing, and establishing treatment protocols, health coaches work to help people implement the behavior changes that clinicians prescribe.

That's why health coaches are an essential part of the collaborative practice model of healthcare. In collaborative healthcare, practitioners work with health coaches, nutritionists, and other allied providers to provide patients all of the support they need to make lasting changes. That leads to better patient outcomes and improved health—and greater satisfaction for clinicians.