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Lifestyle Medicine and Health Coaching – a perfect marriage?

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ABSTRACT

While the field of lifestyle medicine has been growing rapidly world-wide over the past two decades in particular, the prevalence of chronic (lifestyle-related) disease is increasing, particularly in developed nations. Lifestyle Medicine approaches are a promising basis for preventing, managing and reversion chronic disease; however, these approaches are based almost exclusively on individual behavioral change. Such changes are best developed and supported with a health-coaching methodology.

Keywords: health coaching, lifestyle medicine, chronic disease, behavior change

INTRODUCTION

The field of Lifestyle Medicine has been growing rapidly around the world over the last decade. There are now societies or colleges of lifestyle medicine practitioners in the USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Israel, Brazil, Poland, India, Chile, Nigeria, Portugal, Hungary, Malaysia, Lithuania, Pakistan, Colombia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Mexico, China, Mongolia, Argentina, Costa Rica, Turkey and, of course, Romania! [1].

These collected societies represent tens of thousands of physicians and allied health practitioners who understand the power of lifestyle medicine to restore health and well-being and who recognize that the challenges of health care which lie before most of the world are simply not being addressed through the current systems, structures and processes of health care delivery.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHRONIC DISEASE

Non-communicable (or “chronic” or “lifestyle”) diseases account for 41 million annual deaths – about 75% of all global deaths annually. More than three quarters of all these deaths are in low- and middle-income countries [2]. The challenges facing health care

systems are significant, but not unconquerable! Current and historical approaches to healthcare are not slowing this wave. The key feature of most chronic disease is lifestyle, not a pathogen. Simply knowing what constitutes a healthy diet or adequate exercise, is not sufficient. The prevention, treatment and reversal of chronic disease therefore requires evidence based supported behavioral change. This has not been the main focus of health and medical care historically. A new paradigm of care is required.

Health practitioners often experience a dilemma. They are well-equipped with knowledge of the ingredients of great physical, mental and emotional health – nutrition, exercise, sleep, social support, stress management, tobacco avoidance, alcohol moderation. Health care providers are always ready to share that knowledge gladly, but are patients ready to listen, and do they even understand? If knowledge were all that was necessary, consulting rooms would not be filled with people unhappy about their health and feeling unable to change the course of it.

Evidence based Lifestyle Medicine [3] has come a long way in a short time. Thoughtfully applied, evidence-based lifestyle modification prescriptions have the power to manage and reverse several lifestyle diseases and significantly cut risks for the development of others. The American College of Lifestyle Medicine has provided a collection of research sum-

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maries which demonstrate the powerful impact of lifestyle medicine [4].

However, without a means to support patients to engage with these prescriptions, lifestyle medicine risks being a powerful set of conceptual principles which patients may struggle to implement in their day-to-day lives. To combat escalating chronic disease, health and medical practitioners must be equipped with skills to engage patients in making sustained health behavior change.

To this end, the practice of health coaching [5] can be considered the “engine room” of lifestyle medicine. When combined with the principles of Lifestyle Medicine, it is one significant contribution to the challenge of chronic disease reversal and management.

Having the knowledge that lifestyle medicine can make a difference is vital – that creates the capacity to imagine an improved life. But the sense of purpose and desire to make that change does not come from knowledge. This comes from understanding the internal motivations and desires of the patient and then supporting the patient to harness those motivations in the pursuit of improved health. These motivations and desires can be explored through the process of health coaching.

HEALTH COACHING EXPLAINED

Health coaching is the evidence-based application of questioning, conversational and goal setting skills to assist patients to make sustainable health behavior change consistent with their own values and personal strengths. It seeks to empower patients to locate their own unique motivating forces to respond to the health challenges specific to them. Health coaching approaches can be integrated into routine medical consultations.

There is already a broad evidence base for health coaching [6,7], showing the successful application of health coaching in diabetes, obesity, smoking cessation, hypertension and dietary behavior change.

Trained health coaches are therefore expert facilitators of mindset and behavior change that generate sustainably healthy lifestyle to prevent and treat disease and foster well-being and thriving.

All primary care providers – whether they be Physicians, allied health, or community health practitioners are ideally placed to learn the skills of evidence-based health coaching and work with patients as early as possible to support lasting health behavior change.

Making the time to explore this in detail can pose a challenge in clinical practice as a Physician, so referral to a Health Coach may be useful. However, even small interventions can plant the seed of change and have a significant effect over time. Useful interventions can be as simple as asking:

- “What’s the thing that would change most in your life if you stopped smoking/reduced alcohol/lost weight?” (this focuses on the change in capacity a patient might experience)
- “Outside of you, who would be most positively impacted by you stopping smoking?” (this builds on the relational and participatory aspects of behavior change)
- “What’s your vision for your own health and wellness a year from now?” (this invites the patient to consider what matters to them in their life and why – it is a values clarification question)

Any of these inquiries can support a patient to begin asking “What’s in it for me?” and connecting with their own drives, motivators and purpose in making behavioral changes.

HOW WIDESPREAD IS HEALTH COACHING?

A google n-gram search shows a more than 420-fold increase in the number of published articles containing the phrase “health coaching” in 2019, compared with 1990. Furthermore, the US National Board of Health and Wellness Coaching has certified more than 8400 health and wellbeing coaches worldwide since 2016 [8].

The demand for health coaching is growing rapidly, worldwide. A recent analysis [9] points to a 34% increase in demand for healthcare support staff since 2019 and a projected 17% growth in employment opportunities in the health education sector (which includes coaching).

CONCLUSION

The nature of morbidity and mortality is changing in the developed world and swinging strongly towards chronic lifestyle disease. The means to address the challenges will involve both the knowledge of the principles and pillars of lifestyle medicine, as well as the means to bring those principles to life with patients.

Lifestyle Medicine knowledge is vital; however, without a means of becoming purposeful in the life of a patient, it risks not being relevant to that person. Health coaching methodologies support the implementation of lifestyle medicine knowledge in ways that have meaning and personal value to patients.

Knowledge without Purpose is Pointless, but
Knowledge with Purpose is Phenomenal.

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