

Chapter 3

Reflections of Health Coaching Narratives

ABSTRACT

This narrative focuses on a health coach collaborating with a physical therapist and working with the emotional needs of physical therapy patients, but anyone looking to improve health can use the strategies presented. Integrative health coaching incorporates vision and values into a person's goal-setting process. Health coaches provide resources such as journal writing to assist the healing journeys of patients as well as strategies for healthy people who want to make wellness behavior changes.

HELP FROM HEALTH COACHES

During the pandemic era, numerous patients suffer from the coronavirus. Visitors and family members no longer crowd hospital waiting rooms awaiting news of loved ones. Instead, patients experience procedures and treatments alone except for their caring medical team. Medical teams wear personal protective equipment (PPE) as they work long hours saving lives. Some patients recover quickly, while others need a long rehabilitation. Whether they recover from the coronavirus, another illness, or injury, patients need a supportive team after they leave the hospital. Health coaches have the potential to make a difference for patients recovering from the coronavirus because health coaches play an essential role in helping patients maintain optimism and focus to achieve healing goals.

BACKGROUND OF INTEGRATIVE HEALTH COACHING

Integrative health coaches (IHCs), such as the ones trained at Duke University Integrative Medicine where Jen received her training, focus on an eclectic approach to healing. The Wheel of Health from Duke Integrative Medicine (2010) encourages patients to reflect on multiple dimensions of health including movement, exercise and rest; nutrition; personal and professional development, physical environment;

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relationships and communication; spirituality; mind-body connection; and mindful awareness (p. 5). This makes health become a comprehensive plan that focuses on the person, not just the disease.

Health coaching and conversations about the responses to both written and numerical subjective questions help patients illuminate the health stories they tell themselves. Health coaching builds a bridge between helping patients decode complex medical terms and comprehending their treatment plan. When patients feel that their medical practitioners and health coaches earn the right to hear their stories, the sharing of narratives leads to healing conversations. Health coaches are not psychologists; if a patient wants to share a painful story about the past, the health coach will make a referral to a psychologist. Instead, health coaches help patients maintain forward momentum for achieving their goals by providing encouragement, suggestions for completing a prescribed treatment plan, translation of potentially confusing medical terms, and a supportive person to listen.

Since health coaching is a new field in medicine, there is not a large amount of previous studies to share. Simmons and Wolever (2011) report, “broadly defined, health coaching is a method of working with patients that utilizes thoughtful inquiry, accountability, goal clarification, goal setting, identification of obstacles, use of support systems, and connection to intrinsic motivation, vision, and values to improve health through positive behavior change” (p. 1). Simmons and Wolever summarize the existing research and elaborate,

Despite the infancy of the research, several studies have demonstrated that coaching does improve health outcomes. The strongest findings have been in cardiovascular health, where coaching has been shown to improve total cholesterol, body mass index, stress, exercise, diet, and smoking cessation. Studies of cancer patients have demonstrated decreased pain severity and increased pain control. Studies of coaching for patients with diabetes and related kidney disease have shown increases in health promoting behaviors like physical activity and diet, as well as decreases in fasting blood glucose, hemoglobin A1C, hospital admission rates, and amputations. A coaching intervention also improved outcomes in obese patients (BMIs >30), including decreased waist circumferences and increased functional health status. (p. 1).

Health coaches inspire patients to become educated about a diagnosis and treatment plan as well as collaborate with the medical experts who want to help with the healing process.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

To best help people, health coaches practice active listening and ask questions to know more about the narratives people tell themselves and others. Narrative insights provide as much valuable information as numbers on a patient’s chart. Helldorfer and Moss (2007) believe, “we are players on a hallowed stage, writing our own lines as we perform” (p. 182). Health coaching requires the strength of listening to people’s stories and finding themes in the narratives. Patients complete a combination of numerical subjective and written subjective questions about their current and desired states. They rank numerically on a scale of 1 (low) and 10 (high) how they feel about different aspects of health and respond to a corresponding writing prompt explaining why they assigned that number. The health coach needs to read the writing, pull together the narrative threads, and connect them into a cohesive theme. The following technique and observation section is written in general terms to protect patient confidentiality.

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