

THE ROLE OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS COACHING IN HEALTHIER SG, PRIMARY CARE, AND PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

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ABSTRACT

Increasing international evidence shows that well-designed lifestyle health coaching programmes are crucial in combating preventable non-communicable chronic diseases. In response to rising chronic diseases and disability-adjusted life years brought about by the ageing population, the Ministry of Health (MOH) announced Healthier SG in 2022, with enrolment of residents commencing in 2023. Healthier SG signifies the shift from reactive sick care to preventive care through reshaping lifestyles and health-seeking behaviours of the Singapore population, with the aim of extending health spans and improving quality of life while reducing the burdens on loved ones, the healthcare system, and ultimately healthcare costs. Lifestyles and health-seeking behaviours are shaped by numerous factors including social norms, cultural influences, education background, occupations, levels of health literacy, and access to resources. The task of reshaping these behaviours is complex and has been assigned to primary care stakeholders and community partners. Many involved are unfamiliar with the specifics of lifestyle prescriptions and the role of health coaching in successfully changing behaviours. A shared understanding of the role of health coaching in reshaping lifestyles and health-seeking behaviours is essential in supporting those involved. Access to quality health coaching resources, including a registry of competent health and wellness coaches, can significantly reduce the struggle for those tackling this critical task, facilitating the effective transformation of lifestyles and health-seeking behaviours across Singapore.

Keywords: Chronic disease, health and wellness coaching, lifestyle prescription, preventive medicine, health risks, behavioural change, goal setting, evidence-based, motivational interviewing

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INTRODUCTION

The training of healthcare providers traditionally follows the “disease model”, which focuses on prompt diagnosis and treatment of the symptoms of health problems and complications as they occur. This approach often overlooks psychosocial and cultural factors that are known to influence disease acquisition and progression.¹ Consequentially,

patients typically visit their doctors with complaints, seeking treatment to get well. Family physicians may see up to 40 or more patients a day, listening to their complaints, diagnosing their conditions and prescribing necessary medications with curative being the aim. Preventive medicine, on the other hand, focuses on health promotion and maintenance, reducing risk factors, and preventing health problems from occurring, aligning with Thomas A Edison’s vision.

“The doctor of the future will give no medicine, but will interest his patients in the care of the human frame, in diet, and in the cause and prevention of disease.”

Growing evidence highlights the value of preventive medicine in reducing healthcare costs, morbidities, and mortality, if done well. Studies like DIRECT² and FINGER³ have demonstrated the efficacy of lifestyle interventions in enhancing the mental and physical health of individuals with chronic diseases.

To interest patients in the care of the human frame, in diet, and in the cause and prevention of disease, doctors need to move away from a reactive curative approach to a proactive one using a different set of questions to assess not the symptoms but risk factors, screening tools, and treatment interventions including lifestyle prescriptions that target modifiable risk factors. In a busy clinical setting, discussing and educating patients about these interventions and the potential results, coupled with ensuring follow-ups, can be challenging.

Successful lifestyle changes require a team-based approach. In an ideal world, a family physician would initiate this process by emphasising the importance of lifestyle changes and identifying specific areas for improvement through lifestyle prescription. A trained health and wellness coach can then follow up with the patients, working together to improve patients’ health literacy, addressing the psychosocial and cultural aspects of the lifestyle change, monitoring progress, and also motivating the unmotivated while regularly updating the referring doctor to ensure coordinated care.

Access to a pool of competent health and wellness coaches could significantly ease the burden on doctors and facilitate the implementation of Healthier SG.

WHAT IS HEALTH AND WELLNESS COACHING?

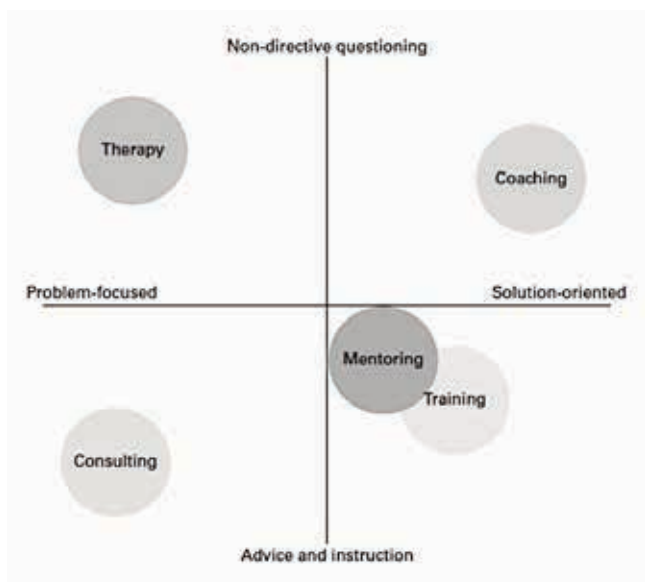
Health and wellness coaching is more than having healthcare workers, like doctors or nurses, talking to a patient about their health behaviours and possible changes. It is also beyond the use of motivational interviewing skills in a health setting. Health and wellness coaching transcends mere conversations about health behaviours and changes between healthcare workers and patients. It is the strategic

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application of coaching principles in the context of health and wellness. To understand health and wellness coaching, one must first grasp the essence of coaching itself.

Coaching has become a vital leadership skill across diverse sectors, including sports, corporate environments, healthcare, education, and the public and non-profit sectors. The demand for coaching and coach training has significantly increased over the past two decades, leading to the development numerous theories and methods, as well as standards. Despite its growth, coaching is still evolving academically with the rise in academics interest in this area. Defining “coach” as a verb, noun, and profession is complex, involving various perspectives from diverse foundational disciplines. Each of these disciplines contributes its own theoretical frameworks and best practices, shaping the theoretical grounding of practitioners from varied occupational backgrounds now working as coaches.⁴⁻⁶ This diversity results in numerous definitions and models of coaching, making it challenging to differentiate coaching from other human development interventions.⁷

Figure 1



Source: Swart, J. & Guirguis, C. (2023)

WHAT SETS COACHING APART?

It is important to understand that “coaching is distinct from advising, counselling, consulting, therapy, recommending, instructing, teaching, or problem solving”.⁸

Coaching facilitates individuals in discovering their potential, driving motivation and progress, rather than teaching or instructing them.⁹ As opposed to counselling, directing, or managing, evidence-based health and wellness coaching is the application of clinical interventions to actively engage patients in self-management of health conditions and behavioural change, with the goal of improving health outcomes, lowering health risks, and reducing overall costs.¹⁰ This makes health and wellness coaching a learning and development model, different from

the problem-solving approach of the traditional medical model. Therefore, it necessitates a methodology that diverges from instructing, commanding, or expecting compliance, distinguishing it from traditional health education or health promotion practices.

In health and wellness coaching, both the health and wellness coach and the patient or client bring their own expertise to the sessions. Clients are the experts in their own lives and are responsible for creating their own path to successful behavioural change. Health and wellness coaches bring with them tools and methods to the coaching sessions, structuring the coaching process to facilitate and support the clients’ lifestyle change journey through the appropriate provision of tools that have been overlooked or new to the latter.

Through a combination of intentional questioning, mindful listening, encouragement, empathy, rapport building, and trust, health and wellness coaching creates a space for clients to reflect, be creative, and be open-minded about exploring and learning about themselves, their blind spots, and obstacles in lifestyle change. This empowers clients to explore and uncover what they can do to advance in the best direction and achieve their health goals. Wolever et al (2013) defined health coaching as “a patient-centred approach wherein patients at least partially determine their goals, use self-discovery or active learning processes together with content education to work toward their goals, and self-monitor behaviours to increase accountability, all within the context of an interpersonal relationship with a coach”.¹¹ In Singapore, the Society of Behavioural Health, Singapore (SBHS, 2023) defines health and wellness coaching as “a client-centred, collaborative, and educational process that empowers and supports individuals in achieving health and wellness goals, ultimately enhancing their overall wellbeing.”¹² Health and wellness coaches use a variety of evidence-based techniques, such as motivational interviewing, SMART goal setting, and behavioural change strategies to help individuals identify and overcome barriers to health behaviours. By fostering self-directed sustainable behaviour changes, health coaching enables individuals to take control of their health and wellness journeys.

THE EFFICACY OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS COACHING IN BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE AND HEALTH OUTCOMES

I can see the burning question in your mind: Does health and wellness coaching work? Behavioural change and health and wellness coaching have received considerable attention in research, with substantial evidence supporting their positive impact on various aspects of well-being. As mentioned, studies such as DIRECT¹³ and FINGER¹⁴ have demonstrated the efficacy of health coaching in weight management, fostering physical activity and enhancing the mental and physical health of individuals living with chronic diseases.

Gordon et al (2016)¹⁵ pioneered an affordable and

comprehensive Lifestyle Health Coaching (LHC) programme (SCRIP) that proved to be evidence-based, technology-enabled, data-driven, and outcome-oriented. Originally developed for employees of large organisations, this programme successfully expanded its reach to diverse clinical and nonclinical settings. The researchers concluded that the implementation of well-designed LHC programmes serve as crucial tools in the global fight against preventable non-communicable chronic diseases. For patients with chronic diseases, health coaching has demonstrated a wide array of positive behavioural outcomes including boosting diabetes self-efficacy, improving mood, stress reduction, enhancing quality of life and care, promoting timely medical consultations, bolstering adherence and compliance to treatments, and facilitating improvements in diet and exercise. Numerous studies have supported these findings, underscoring the transformative potential of health coaching.¹⁶⁻²⁷

In a compelling study by MacGregor et al (2006),²⁸ primary care clinicians, predominantly family doctors, were trained in goal-setting and action planning techniques and asked to conduct action plan discussions with patients during medical visits. The study revealed that an impressive 83 percent of patient encounters resulted in behaviour-change action plans. Despite lasting an average of 6.9 minutes, time constraints prevented the widespread adoption and sustainability of the goal-setting process. Seventy-four percent of clinicians reported that the training had changed the way they discuss health behaviour with patients, leading to behaviour-change discussions that were equally or more satisfying than previous ones. Nonetheless, most clinicians favoured delegating the goal-setting process to other members of the primary care team.

Examples like SCRIP, DIRECT, and FINGER highlight that successful behavioural change interventions are possible. By supporting individuals in adopting healthy lifestyle changes, health and wellness coaching proves to be a cost-effective strategy for preventing chronic diseases and addressing existing health issues at their root causes, often lifestyle-related risks. It can potentially reduce the severity of chronic diseases and expensive hospitalisation costs, and even put conditions like diabetes into remission.

THE COMPLEXITY OF BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

Changing one's lifestyle habits is never easy. Habits are just the tip of the iceberg. Habit formation is influenced and motivated by numerous intra-personal, interpersonal, and societal factors, highlighting the importance of exploring the social determinants of health in lifestyle change conversations. Exploring the bio-psychosocial-spiritual aspects provides insight into the barriers hindering clients' success in behavioural change and what might support them in their journey. Additionally, behaviours and motivation to change can be nudged by one's accessibility to resources and infrastructure within the physical, social, and digital

environments. Social norms, cultural norms, education background, occupations, and levels of health literacy play significant roles in motivation, health decisions, and health behaviours as well.

Thus, there is no one-size-fits-all approach in health and wellness coaching. Health and wellness coaches need to be trained in various evidence-based techniques, such as adult learning theories, behavioural change theories, motivation theories, and social determinants of health, in addition to lifestyle medicine fundamentals, goal setting, and communications strategies and techniques to foster self-directed sustainable behaviour changes.

To sustain behavioural change, the coaching process also includes identifying and developing a supportive community network encompassing nurturing relationships, resources, and tools. Given the complexity of changing health behaviours, effective health and wellness coaching conversations cannot occur in a brief 5-minute consultation with a doctor or nurse who is only trained in motivational interviewing techniques and person-centred care approaches. Lifestyle change requires a team-based approach, starting with a family physician highlighting and discussing the importance of lifestyle changes and identifying specific areas for improvement, i.e., lifestyle prescription. This conversation would be followed up by a health and wellness coach trained in the above-mentioned areas and is an expert in the coaching process. Depending on the client's chosen direction, the coach makes necessary referrals to the allied health team and other professionals, such as dietitians for weight-loss diet plans or personal trainers for strength-training, to prevent frailty and injury, and also monitors the effectiveness of these referrals in achieving the clients' health goals, making adjustments as and when necessary. The health and wellness coach will update the doctor on clients' progress on a regular basis.

THE COACHING PROCESS

The "how does health and wellness coaching work?" lies in the coaching process.

For instance, when a patient shares the following struggles with diabetes and weight loss during the health coaching session:

"I have been struggling with diabetes and weight loss for many years. I really want to improve my blood sugar and lose some weight, but I keep going back to my old habits. I know I can do it and others also tell me so, but I don't know why I just can't seem to be sustain my lifestyle changes."

The health and wellness coach's response significantly impacts how the conversation unfolds and its ultimate outcome. In interactions, both professionally and personally, we carry our assumptions, biases, and judgements. These biases and assumptions, shaped by our training and lived experiences, influence our focus, how we prioritise

different aspects of a narrative, organisation of information, interpretation, and inferences. Our moment-to-moment choices during conversations steer the discussion's direction, and consequently shape the end result.

The decision to reflect or ask a question following the patient's sharing and the content of those reflections or questions shape and are shaped throughout the conversation, scaffolding shared meaning-making and insights realisation. Thus, health coaching transcends merely asking powerful and insightful questions to elicit an "aha" moment. Simply arming oneself with a long list of open-ended questions and thinking of the next useful question to ask while the patient talks, rather than truly listening, often stresses and frustrates health and wellness coaches.

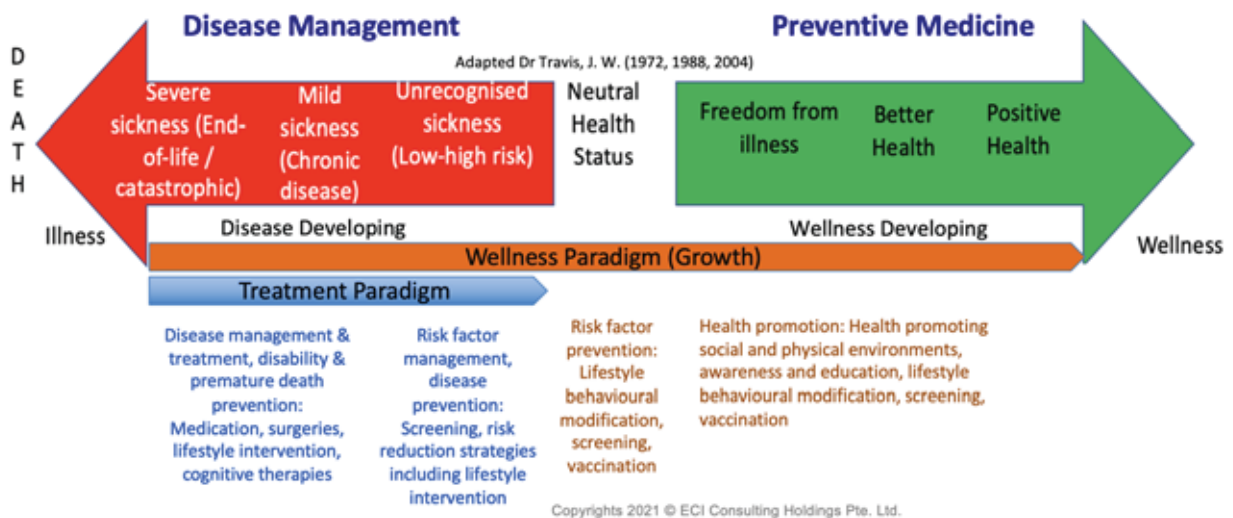
Health and wellness coaching involves actively participating in a spontaneous process of co-construction with the client, helping them uncover their capability of creating their own solutions. The questions posed, reflections, and affirmations made help to mirror, reframe, at times exaggerate what was heard. This allows clients to hear, become more aware of, and reflect on their thoughts and actions, giving rise to those "aha" moments. It is never about following preconceived scripts or algorithms like those with chatbots.

Over time, by enhancing clients' self-efficacy in self-management and self-monitoring, health coaching instils accountability in individuals while supporting the development of habits that work best for them, ultimately leading to healthier versions of themselves. Hence, health and wellness coaching is a learning and development model. Additionally, health and wellness coaching provides opportunities to increase clients' health literacy in a manner that is tailored to their individual needs and preferences, making it a personalised and effective approach to improving health outcomes.

SUITABILITY FOR HEALTHY INDIVIDUALS

A common question I receive from the health and wellness coaches I supervise is whether health and wellness coaching is suitable for healthy individuals. The answer is unequivocally yes. Behavioural interventions in health and wellness coaching are applicable across all stages of the health continuum as illustrated in **Figure 2**.²⁹

Figure 2



Source: ECI Consulting Holdings. (2023)

It supports individuals in maintaining a healthy lifestyle and even improving it, as our body, including our brain, is flexible and capable of rejuvenation, leading to the possibility of becoming even healthier than before. The effectiveness of health and wellness coaching is tied to a growth mindset, where the client and coach work towards what needs to be done – a series of small achievable steps, building up to the ultimate health goal. A growth mindset fosters curiosity, possibility, and hope, creating the optimism needed for patient activation – getting people to be willing to and start taking charge of their own healthcare and engage in behaviours that promote health and wellbeing (whether they are healthy or living with diseases). This aligns with the objectives of Healthier SG.

CREATING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND TRUST

I often receive feedback from health and wellness coaches about clients who respond with only one or two words, indicating disengagement, which is often due to a lack of psychological safety.³⁰ When trust is absent and clients do not feel psychologically safe, they are unlikely to have open and meaningful conversations with their health coach in exploring and uncovering their needs, desires, and barriers to achieving their health goals and better health outcomes. It is the responsibility of health and wellness coaches to create a safe and autonomous-supportive environment where clients can speak freely without fear of being judged,

humiliated, talked-down, scolded, or even shunned. As a health and wellness coach, I believe it is crucial for clients to feel comfortable in their own skins as we work towards their improved health and wellness. Thus, I always start my coaching relationship with these two tasks: assuring clients that they will not be judged; and having coaching contracts that clearly stipulate my roles and theirs. These help create a safe ambience for open sharing about the challenges hindering them from achieving the goal(s) set, enabling us to work together to address the challenges as they arise.

THE CURRENT STATE OF HEALTH COACHING IN SINGAPORE

It is noteworthy that the positive effects of health coaching are most pronounced when delivered by trained personnel – healthcare professionals and lay peers. This highlights the importance of proper training and expertise in maximising the benefits of health coaching interventions.

Currently, health coaching in Singapore is a “buyer beware” market where anyone can claim to be a health and wellness coach without any proper training or accreditation. This highlights the need for standards and accreditation to ensure the quality and effectiveness of health coaching. Health and wellness coaching is grounded in the theoretical foundations of coaching psychology, positive psychology, case management, strength-based theory, adult learning theories, and behavioural change theories, including the transtheoretical model of change, self-determination theory, and social cognitive theory. These are coupled with communication techniques like motivational interviewing.

Figure 3



Source: American College of Lifestyle Medicine

To excel in health and wellness coaching, practitioners must also be knowledgeable in the sciences of lifestyle medicine, which includes nutrition, exercise physiology, stress management, smoking cessation, and disease development

and management. This comprehensive knowledge allows health and wellness coaches to effectively support lifestyle plans prescribed by family physicians.

The Society of Behavioural Health, Singapore (SBHS) unveiled its competency framework in health and wellness coaching in October 2023. Since then, SBHS has been engaging and collaborating with diverse stakeholders including the institutions of higher learning, the healthcare clusters, Sports SG, fitness professionals, etc, to advance the standards of health and wellness coaching in Singapore. To benchmark against international standards in health and wellness coaching, SBHS has signed a MOU with UK International Health Coaching Association (UKIHCA) to co-recognise health and wellness coaches registered with either organisation. SBHS, together with its Academic Board, is committed to building a pool of competent health and wellness coaches and its registry of trained health and wellness coaches will be launched in Q4 2024.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the mounting international evidence accentuates the critical impact of lifestyle health coaching programmes in combating the surge of preventable non-communicable chronic diseases, enhancing quality of life, and lowering healthcare costs, in face of an aging population. The challenge of reshaping health behaviours is formidable. Primary care stakeholders and community partners are grappling with the complexities of lifestyle prescription and social prescribing, making the role of health and wellness coaches more critical than ever within the “Healthier SG” initiative, primary care, and preventive medicine. Acknowledging, embracing, and integrating quality health coaching resources into Singapore’s health strategy, including an official registry of skilled health and wellness coaches, is a necessity for the success of lifestyle prescription, and ultimately the Healthier SG initiative. Moving in the right direction from the onset is crucial. If we don’t lay the correct foundation now, the consequences could adversely affect the success of the Healthier SG initiative in the long run. The future of our nation’s health depends on it. Each and every one of us can play an active and crucial role in driving the quality of Singapore’s healthcare.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest in relation to this article.

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LEARNING POINTS

- **Lifestyle interventions are most effective when implemented through a team-based approach, beginning with a lifestyle prescription by doctors.**
 - **Health and wellness coaching is an integral part of a lifestyle prescription. Without the support of encouragement, motivation, goal setting, monitoring, and necessary adjustments, a lifestyle prescription is likely to be ineffective.**
 - **Well-trained health and wellness coaches alleviate the burden of lifestyle prescription and monitoring for busy doctors, thus facilitating the implementation of Healthier SG.**
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