

Health Promotion Practitioner

Practical solutions for health enhancement programming

Is It Really Easier to Make Little Changes?

Think Big for Big Results

For years, wellness practitioners have encouraged clients to make little changes in lifestyle — taking the stairs in place of the elevator, cutting down on fast food rather than eliminating it, adding a piece of fruit to your meal instead of making fruits or vegetables the main course. But — with long-lasting results in mind — is it really easier to make little changes?

How many of your clients have lost weight, stuck to an exercise program, quit smoking, or reduced stress through little changes? Most people I've worked with have made big changes — they started walking for 30 minutes every night after dinner, stopped snacking while watching TV, made substantial differences at home or work to alleviate stress, threw out all their junk food so they could start eating right, or swore off fast food drive-thrus.

It's a myth that little changes are easier than big changes. Why? Because small changes are too close to old habits to keep from slipping back. The well-meaning though misguided belief that if you just have to "give up a little" you won't feel deprived is especially destructive; you're still giving up something significant psychologically, but not gaining much for your trouble. With big changes, you're also giving up something, but you're much more likely to see the fruits of your effort — which reinforces your commitment to keep going.

So although small changes may seem easier at first,

they're actually more difficult to maintain in the long run, and don't achieve lasting results.

More Power Vacuuming

Many studies have found even moderate increases in activity spread out over the day have a positive impact on health. The media and national health experts immediately seized on this story again, encouraging Americans to do housework with vigor and watch the benefits pile up. And once again, another TV doctor suggested we park our cars a bit farther from the entrance (can't we come up with another idea?) for the health of it.

If prompting people to do these little things actually resulted in more activity, we would be all for it. But the fact is it doesn't. Just take a walk through any airport or mall to see how effective the last 5 years of "here and there adds up" messages have been. It's scary. And it probably further deludes people into believing that getting up to change the channel rather than using the remote means they're getting their exercise for the day.

Get Real

For better health habits to be long lasting, they need to be big, not little. For people to feel they're actually accomplishing something, they need to take a big step outside their comfort zone, not just slip a toe over the line. In fact, encouraging people to make little changes may actually set them up for failure, not success.

In addition to the authority we assign to doctors, their lifestyle advice often carries more weight than a health

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educator's because they're direct: "You need to quit drinking... start exercising... lose weight."

Contrast that with the typical wellness approach: "Limit alcoholic beverages to 2 a day... take the elevator instead of the stairs... cut down on the fat and watch your portion sizes."

If you really want to serve your clients, don't shy away from big change recommendations. And especially don't try to convince them that little changes will produce big results; they won't. By getting them to think big you give them a chance to accomplish something big and feel good about themselves... a chance to look in the mirror and say "I did it" and have that mean something to them. 🇺🇸



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